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# **AGAINST AND BEYOND – FOR SOCIOLOGY**

## **A Study on the Self-understanding of Sociologists in England**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is wholly my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other University.

## **Abstract**

This thesis is a theoretical and empirical investigation into the self-understanding of thirty sociologists in England and their relationship with the discipline. It investigates sociologists' aspirations and how they unfold and are compromised in sociological practice. Based on the work of Alvin Gouldner, the thesis both examines the changing shape of sociology as a body of knowledge and institution as well as sociologists' changing relationships with their theories and practices. At the core of this study is the recognition of a close intertwining of our ontological states, epistemological outlooks and actual practices as sociologists.

The three-part analysis of the empirical research reflects a Gouldnerian understanding of sociology as the inextricable link between theory and practice. In 'Part I: The Calling of Sociology – Sociologists' Claims and Practices' I analyse sociologists' processes of sociological becoming and what they consider to be the key features of the discipline – synthesis, the social and critique. These key features and my respondents' aspirations are the point of departure against which the realities of their sociological practice are measured in 'Part II: Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions'. Analysing social theory as a sociological practice, I illustrate how the social as an analytical key category in sociology becomes frequently compromised. Furthermore, Part II encompasses an analysis of the RAE in its overemphasis on research and publications at the expense of teaching, and shows how this fractures sociologists' initial disciplinary aspirations. Thereafter I

demonstrate sociologists' dilemmas in practising sociology in a synthetic way, and how they face the disciplining nature of the discipline within the current political economies of research and publishing. This is followed by a discussion of how sociologists' claims of contributing to critique and public discourse are practised and compromised. Against the background of the analysis in Part II, the question of what is left of sociologists' aspirations and the discipline's aims in being critical, analysing the social and being a synthetic discipline, is raised. Finally, in 'Part III: Living Sociology', I revisit my respondents' initial aspirations in the light of their practices and analyse how they live and practise sociology's key moments – critique, synthesis and the social. The last part of the analysis draws an outline of how sociology can be practised against current constraints, living the synthetic and critical character of the discipline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Prologue

This is a piece of drama. The protagonists are a discipline and its inhabitants. The plot is set in the UK – in England, to be precise – in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Numerous figures from various centuries, mostly white men, enter the stage. They start to talk about the foundations of the discipline. In the beginning, they introduce themselves as lawyers, as philosophers, biologists, economists, historians, psychologists, enlightened people indeed. Later, they say that they are sociologists. More and more people enter the stage, starting their own monologues, hardly listening to each other. Through the vast collection of voices, I hear some of them saying that the discipline could be characterised by particular features – its synthetic nature, and its inclination to investigate the social in a critical way, thereby contributing to social progress and change. In slightly different versions these phrases get repeated. As we enter the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, someone says ‘Sociological Imagination’. Still, hardly any women or coloured faces on stage. Later on, we hear ‘identity’ and ‘postmodernity’, ‘reflexivity’ and ‘post-colonialism’. The stage is now packed with people, more and more women and coloured faces amongst them. Through the dense monologues I can discern some conversations about ‘interdisciplinarity’, ‘cultural studies’ and ‘media’. As the noise of this collective of voices becomes almost unbearable, it gets replaced by another, equally disturbing phenomenon. Books, sheets of paper and journal articles fall on the floor, covering everything. Some of the protagonists are hit by paper, gasp for air and wish to be heard. ‘I would like to discuss the issue of the sociological calling’, a woman says with clear voice. A group of protagonists, entangled in paper, finds each

other in an almost synonymous response chorus of ‘Oxford University Press, Routledge, Sociology.’ A little later, piles of paper get replaced by PDF files that are screened on the floor and the ceiling. We can hear the competitive sound of thousands of computer keyboards; a noise that never seems to end and gets enmeshed with discussions about students, numbers, markets and assessment.

Suddenly, another sociologist enters the stage. Through the murmur, we are surprised about the clarity with which we can hear the young South Asian woman speaking. ‘Your support is needed for a demonstration,’ she says, ‘for a student who faces deportation under the Anti-Terrorism act, being accused of terrorist activities. Academic freedom is at risk, voices need to be heard.’<sup>1</sup> ‘Sorry’, replies another sociologist, well known for his writing on social movements. ‘I would really like to share my concerns with you about this. Will this be an authorised event? Why are the others not going there?’ Thereafter, some people join a group on Facebook, feeling heroic for one moment, others continue writing their books – waiting for them to be delivered to the stage that is already covered in books almost up to the ceiling: ‘Bloody activists, leftovers from the 1960s’, one protagonist thinks. ‘I will write about this’. There also is a reptile on stage; we will hear from it later.

This is what this piece of drama is about – the sociological calling as it is envisioned, lived and compromised by sociologists in England. It is a complex plot, but I am trying to stage it here.

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<sup>1</sup> Times Higher Education Supplement, ‘Research into Islamic terrorism led to police response’. 22nd May 2008.

# **1 Mapping out an Investigation into Sociology and its Inhabitants**

This thesis is about sociology and sociologists. It is a theoretical as well as an empirical investigation into the self-understanding of thirty sociologists in England and their relationship with the discipline. We are interested in sociologists' aspirations and how they unfold and are compromised in sociological practice. This study is indebted to a critical understanding of sociology that centers round the unity of professional and personal roles, the embeddedness of intellectual activities into current material realities and the framing of sociological work, as well as sociology's potential in making a contribution to critique and social change in society. In this sense, this thesis aims to examine the changing shape of sociology as a body of knowledge and institution, as well as sociologists' changing relationship with their theories and practices. Hence, what is at the core of this thesis is the recognition of a close intertwining of our ontological states, epistemological outlooks and actual practices.

This general orientation will be addressed in terms of the following research questions.

- 1.) How do sociologists see themselves and how do they relate to the discipline?
- 2.) What do sociologists in England see as the key features of the discipline?
- 3.) How are sociologists' aspirations translated into their sociological practices?

4.) How can sociology as a discipline be lived and practised in 21<sup>st</sup>-century  
Higher Education landscapes?

In responding to these questions, I will first review sociological literature that has been concerned with the role of the sociologist and sociology from a meta-perspective. Whilst the first part of this review will provide an overview of the relevant literature from the post-war period, the second part will analyse approaches that potentially see ontological and epistemological dimensions in a study of the collective self-understanding of sociologists, and may therefore qualify as the theoretical foundation of this study. Focusing on the work of Alvin Gouldner, I will provide an analysis of his Reflexive Sociology and constructively critique it by setting it in relation to the work of like-minded thinkers. Finally, we will sketch the development of sociology in the UK.

This will be followed by a chapter on the epistemological and methodological challenges of doing research on one's own profession, and an outline of my research methodology. The final three-part analysis of my empirical research will reflect a Gouldnerian understanding of how sociology and sociologists can be understood. In 'The Calling of Sociology – Sociologists' claims and practices' I will analyse sociologists' processes of sociological becoming and their perceptions of the key features of the discipline. Their aspirations will be our point of departure against which the realities of their sociological practice will consequently be measured in 'Part II: Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions'. I will shed light on the various areas of sociological work and analyse how sociologists' aspirations are

fulfilled and compromised. Finally, in ‘Part III: Living Sociology’, I will revisit my respondents’ initial aspirations in the light of their practices and will examine how they live and practise sociology. This last part of our analysis will also draw an outline of how sociology can be practised, living the synthetic and critical character of the discipline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Sociology in the UK is said to be in a crisis. It is charged with having become very fragmented (Scott, 2005b; Stanley, 2000). Instead of providing a cohesive and complex analysis of society and engaging with current challenges, such as the biosciences, sociology gets lost in specialisms. As a result, other disciplines seem to take over the role sociology has had for decades (Fuller, 2006). Similarly, Horowitz claims that the decomposition of sociology into sub-disciplines is to blame for sociology having lost its purpose (Horowitz, 1994). The diagnosis of a crisis within sociology is by no means new, and almost seems to be a fixture of the discipline itself (Bottomore, 1975; Holmwood, 1996). In ‘The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology’, ‘Gouldner’s invocation of a sociological crisis combined a diagnosis of the discipline’s contemporary state, a prediction about its future, and a utopian exhortation’ (Steinmetz and Chae, 2002: 112). For Gouldner, the ongoing crisis in sociology centered round the dominance of Parsonian thought in sociology, particularly in US sociology. His ‘Reflexive Sociology’ was framed as an alternative approach countering this crisis (Gouldner, 1970). Taking Gouldner’s message further to present times and looking at the kind of sociological knowledge currently produced, sociology is often accused of having become rather descriptive, detached from material relations and aloof from any kind of larger framework and structural



understanding (Stanley, 2000). With a hint in the direction of post-modern sociologists who are partly to blame for a weekly influx of ‘narratives’, Rojek and Turner capture this kind of sociology as ‘decorative sociology’ (Rojek and Turner, 2000). Likewise, Liz Stanley blames her colleagues for not taking notice of more general developments and events in the outside world and their relevance for sociological work (Stanley, 2000).

Yet, whilst sociology had been said to be in a crisis many times throughout its history, the crisis of sociology at the turn of the millennium seems to take a unique shape. Not only is sociology reported to be intellectually fragmented, as outlined above; the fragmentation of sociology seems to be equally enhanced by the codes of specialist profiles on the basis of which the academic labour market in the UK currently functions (Brown and Scase, 2001). The so-called crisis in sociology also seems to reflect a trend towards increasing professionalisation of sociology that is a result of the restructuring processes within Higher Education (Willmott, 2003).<sup>2</sup> The massification of Higher Education throughout the last forty years, the scarcity of state funding and the implementation of assessment procedures resulted in the increase of fixed-term contracts and more academics competing for jobs (Hockey, 2004; Miller, 1996; Shore, C. and Wright, S. 2000; Tight, 2000). Furthermore, the rising workload in teaching and administration leaves less time for research, based on academics being made accountable in the seven-yearly Research Assessment Exercise (Harris, 2005; Smyth, 1995). Sociologists are not only pressured to

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<sup>2</sup> For further information on the development of British Sociology in the post-war period and the expansion of British Higher Education see APPENDIX E: The British Higher Education System.

prioritise research over teaching, but also face the challenge of finding a balance between their research interests and the demands of funding bodies (Sparkes, 2007; Willmott, 2003). All these developments have substantially challenged academic identities (Henkel, 2000; Parker and Jary, 1995) and have had effects on the discipline of sociology itself (Rappert, 1999). In 2003, The Commission on the Social Sciences in the UK observed a tendency in sociological research to be repetitive and less innovative and considers this to be the result of restructuring processes in HE towards performance and output (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003). These developments are by no means specific to sociology. As Harley and Lee have shown, in a performance-oriented research environment it also seems to become less likely for researchers in other social science disciplines, such as economics, to deviate from mainstream perceptions of research (Harley and Lee, 1997). This suggests that the actual shape of the sociological discipline and its changing format cannot be understood without taking into account the material conditions within which academics produce knowledge.

In spite of structural changes such as the implementation of performance measurement and the increase of fixed-term contracts having severely affected academics in both their employment security and working conditions, as well as in their ability intellectually to practise their disciplines in both research and teaching, academics in the UK have not mounted much resistance to any of these changes (Roberts, 2002). Whilst this lack of engagement and critique may also be an expression of the decreasing political activism of academics that reflects a general decline in political participation (Gitlin, 1994), it does raise particular questions for a

discipline such as sociology that is essentially founded on the aim of contributing to critique and social change in society (Hawthorn, 1987).

That the discipline is still being unified around this key feature – even though this may partly be confined to a rhetoric level of engagement – can be seen in the frequent reference to C. Wright Mills’ conceptualisation of sociology and sociological activity as critique, as spelled out in his ‘The Sociological Imagination’ (Mills, 2000). Yet, the current developments within the discipline as a body of knowledge as well as a sociological practice raise questions of whether the discipline still lives up to its initial calling. According to Stanley, many self-proclaimed critics, rather than cultivate their allegedly critical role in their theoretical approach, chose to pursue a career in ‘critique’ rather than connecting theory with the praxis out there: ‘Gouldner’s famous, or perhaps infamous, discussion of advocacy and partisanship in ‘For Sociology’ is directed towards the hypocrisy of those sociologists who proclaimed they were ‘on the sides of’ oppressed groups but who actually took up a ‘zoo-keeping role’, displaying the unfortunate and their social wounds to impress other sociologists, pull in research grants and demonstrate their own radical credentials’ (Stanley, 2000: 60). As ‘[...] being ‘a child of his time’ entailed having a commitment *as a sociologist* to engage with ‘out there’, not to lose sight of the intellectual specificities and requirements of ‘in here’, but rather to retain the ‘Janus-faced’ character of the scholarly life’ (Stanley, 2000: 67), for Gouldner, these developments in British sociology and academia more generally would have been an expression of sociologists not living up to their initial claims. The failure of

being ‘a child of their time’ can also be seen in the declining public presence of sociologists, particularly in non-academic circles (Burawoy, 2005).

Hence, what we can see so far is that the alleged crisis within sociology touches the dimensions of theory, the sociological calling, the role sociology plays in society as well as sociologists’ practices and their conditions of knowledge production. However, the topic at hand has mostly been approached in a rather segmented way, not connecting the discourses on changes in Higher Education (Ylijok, 2005) in their impact on academic activity and work (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Smyth, 1995) with an analysis of the development of sociology as a discipline in this context (Fuller, 2006; Scott, 2005b), and sociologists’ relationship to the discipline in theory and practice. Besides, as Stanley emphasises, the announcement of the crisis within sociology also seems to remain somewhat vague, not providing empirical information about ‘[...] the discipline as a whole about who is being appointed and promoted, or whose work really does rule its many intellectual roots’ (Stanley, 2000: 59).

It is exactly the missing connection between apparently related bodies of literature as well as the lack of empirical insights into how sociologists relate to the discipline and how they practise it, that we would like to take as our point of departure for our investigations into the self-understanding of sociologists in England. Based on thirty qualitative interviews with sociologists in Sociology Departments in England, we will investigate how current sociologists in England see themselves, how they frame their sociological calling and how they practise and relate to sociology. This

includes the analysis of their views of their disciplinary aspirations and their relationship with the discipline. Taking their interpretations of sociology and their sociological calling as a point of departure, we will look into their sociological practices and compare these realities to their initial claims. We are therefore particularly interested in the intertwining of theory and practice and professional aspirations being challenged and compromised by current sociological practice. Finally, we will analyse how sociologists manage to reconcile these conflicting aspects of their profession and practise the discipline in the light of these contradictions.

As an analysis of sociologists' self-understanding cannot be seen in separation from an analysis of the discipline and the developments in Higher Education, this thesis aims to connect bodies of literature that were previously considered in isolation from each other. Connecting literature on the sociology of knowledge, the role of the sociologist and the history of sociology with literature on the research into changes in Higher Education, sociology of work and current social theory, we will do justice to sociology as a body of knowledge and practice in current Higher Education contexts in England being a result of the constant intertwining of ontological and epistemological dimensions.

## **2 Theorising the Sociological Calling and Sociological Practice**

Based on the preceding analysis, we can conclude that in analysing the sociologist in her self-understanding, we need theoretical approaches that enable us to understand the processes of the production of sociological becoming, calling and sociological practice in social theory and research. In that endeavour, we need approaches that embrace the intertwining of ontology and epistemology in social theory and sociological practice. In the following, we would like to review the relevant literature against the criterion of its potentially enabling us to look at the sociologist and her self-understanding in its complex intertwining. The two-part structure of the literature analysis is a result of this evaluation. The first part provides an overview of the sociological literature that has been concerned with the role of the sociologist and sociology from a meta-perspective, from the post-war period onwards. The second part is devoted to theoretical approaches that provide a solid basis on which the sociologist can be studied in her embeddedness in the discipline in a particular socioeconomic and political background. Finally, in preparing the ground for an investigation into the self-understanding of sociologists in England, we will provide a brief overview of the history of sociology in the UK.

## **2.1 *Sociologists and Sociology as Subjects of Inquiry***

The questions of why we do sociology, what it is for and how we can frame the role of the sociologist have preoccupied sociology ever since the formation of the discipline (Bryant, 1976; Reynolds and Reynolds, 1970). The idea of reflecting on sociology from a second-order perspective has emerged under different notions, such as ‘sociology of sociology’, ‘reflexive sociology’, ‘critical sociology’, ‘radical sociology’, ‘sociological imagination’, ‘priest sociology’, ‘prophet sociology’ or ‘public sociology’, to name a few. Despite these varied labels, all these keywords stand for a preoccupation with sociology from a second-order perspective. Whilst we are not able to provide a comprehensive analysis of all these concepts, we will focus on literature from 1940 onwards in its framing of sociology and the function of the sociologist. As mentioned above, we will analyse the respective literature with regard to its allowing us to view the sociologist and her self-understanding in their intertwining of ontological and epistemological dimensions – connecting theory, sociological calling, practice and life.

Whilst this thesis analyses the self-understanding of sociologists in the UK, and specifically in England, in reviewing the literature we have to look beyond national boundaries. This is due to the fact that until the 1980s, the discourse on sociology from a second-order perspective and a preoccupation with the role of the sociologist has been – with a few exceptions<sup>3</sup> – a US-based discourse (Bryant, 1979; Friedrichs, 1970; Gouldner, 1970; Gouldner, 1973; Lynd, 1964; Merton, 1976; Parsons, 1959; Reynolds and Reynolds, 1970). Furthermore, the recently increasing preoccupation

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Ralf Dahrendorf’s discussion on the role of the sociologist in ‘Homo Sociologicus’ (Dahrendorf, 1968).

with public sociology that was mainly triggered by Michael Burawoy's contribution (Burawoy, 2005), has been predominantly taken forward in the US (Clawson *et al.*, 2007) despite the discourse also having found sound readership in the UK (Holmwood, 2007; Turner, 2006). Some observers commented that the particular structure of US sociology after WWII, with rather diametrically opposed theoretical positions, may have provided a setting that nourished an increased engagement with the role of the sociologist and sociology itself (Calhoun, 2007). A strong branch of empirical sociology on the one hand and the dominance of functionalism within US sociology at the time on the other hand may have provided a sufficient basis against which a constructive counter-vision of sociological life leaving mainstream sociological territory could be developed (Calhoun and VanAntwerpen, 2007). In contrast to that, British sociology during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s did not encompass such antagonistic camps (Anderson, 1981). This has more fundamental reasons that go back to UK sociology having assumed a rather different shape compared to that in the US (Halsey, 2004). Due to sociology's comparatively late inclusion in the British university system, sociology was a rather small institutional enterprise until the 1960s (Anderson, 1981; Halliday, 1981) and thus represented a major territory for the reception of American Sociology in the postwar period (Halsey, 2004; Scott, 2005b). This further justifies taking a closer look at the development of a second-order sociology in the US.

From the 1930s onwards, US sociology could be characterised as the center of positivist sociology (Steinmetz, 2007). This process was further reinforced by the migration to the US of European Jewish scholars with a predominantly positivist



orientation during the Nazi regime.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the geo-political situation of WWII and the forced migration of scholars further left its mark on what was then the predominant American conceptualisation of the role of the sociologist, as a mere provider of data disentangled from value positions. Yet, Robert Lynd's 'Knowledge for What?' in 1939 (Lynd, 1964) was born out of opposition to the predominant segregation of empirical analysis from value positions in US Sociology at the time (Steinmetz, 2007). In the light of Fascism in Europe and conservative politics in the US, Lynd reconceptualised the role of the sociologist as a surgeon for society and raised the question of the utility of producing knowledge (Lynd, 1964). According to him, the embeddedness of the researcher in society required a framing of the academic beyond a merely professional role (Lynd, 1964). Lynd therefore sketched what C. Wright Mills phrased twenty years later in 'The Sociological Imagination' and Gouldner almost thirty years later in 'The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology'. Whilst emphasising the social and political responsibility of sociologists, Lynd warned of premature ideological statements on behalf of social scientists: '[...] The responsibility is to keep everlastingly challenging the present with the question: But what is it that we human beings want, and what things would have to be done, in what ways and in what sequence, in order to change the present so as to achieve it?'

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4 Whereas social scientist émigrés with a critical rationalist orientation sought to migrate to the UK, scholars with a Marxist and positivist outlook went to the US. Christian Fleck (Fleck, 2007a) and Wolf Lepenies (Lepenies, 1981) argue that this disparate flux of émigrés can be attributed to the predominant traditions of thought in the UK, such as Rationalism and Utilitarianism, having attracted scholars from the former Viennese circle such as Karl Popper and sociology of knowledge – Karl Mannheim – whereas social scientists from the Frankfurt School – Adorno and Horkheimer – and social scientists with a clear focus on empirical research such as Paul Lazarsfeld and later Paul Neurath sought exile in the US (Fleck, 2007a; Koenig, 1981; Riemer, 1981). These historical phenomena are important to take into account, as a lot of these predominantly Austrian and German social scientists shaped the centers of US sociology, in particular at Columbia University (e.g. Lazarsfeld) and Harvard (Fleck, 2007a; Steinmetz, 2007).

(Lynd, 1964: 250). Having raised this question as the main challenge for the social sciences, Lynd's words are still topical for current times.

Whilst empiricism represented one target, functionalism with its main representative Talcott Parsons served as the main target and *the* point of critique for sociologists who envisioned sociological activity in a diametrically opposed way as a critical and transformative endeavour. Yet, the importance of Parsons' work for our context goes beyond his significance as a scapegoat for critical sociologists. Whilst from a critical social science perspective, commentaries on Parsons' work mostly center around Parsons' notion of objectivity as the leading element of research and the framing of the sociologist as a seemingly value-neutral actor (Bottomore, 1975; Gouldner, 1970), his aim to conceptualise sociology as a synthesis of economics, psychology, anthropology and biology, thereby indicating sociology's synthetic nature, makes him a major figure in the history of sociological thought (Holmwood, 1996).<sup>5</sup> Friedrichs describes functionalist theory as the ruling paradigm of the 1950s and 1960s, standing for a priestly mode of sociology in contrast to a prophet mode of doing sociology: '[T]he sociologist as prophet is consciously committed to an image of society that transcends any given social reality. He differs from the sociologist as priest not in any temptation to distort the reality of a given situation – he is equally dedicated to honoring the empirical facts – but in his awareness of the value-laden choices and implicit commitments confronting those who would extrapolate evidence of past order into the future and in his decision to respond to them in a way

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as Scott notes, one of his major achievements was the transformation of the Department of Sociology at Harvard into the interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations. This allowed for improved dialogue between sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology and was a manifestation of his attempt to make sociology a synthetic discipline (Scott, 2005b).

in which his own comprehension and predictive agency will make it a significant factor for change through its impact upon his fellow sociologists and the 'lay' public' (Friedrichs, 1970: 293). Friedrichs locates the main reasons for the emergence of the priestly mode of sociology in functionalism's perfect matching with the political era of conservatism and the upcoming Cold War. Functionalism, with its neutral conceptualisation of the role of the sociologist, perfectly reflected the conservative worldview of stability of US politics and thereby played a major accomplice role for politics at that time. This is further exemplified by sociologists' involvement in the Manhattan project and project Camelot (Felt and Nowotny and Taschwer, 1995). In return, sociology gained a significant role in US society (Friedrichs, 1970). However, the unintended outcomes of sociologists' involvement in the Camelot and Manhattan projects seriously challenged Parsons' framing of the role of the sociologist. In response to these developments, Parsons slightly reconceptualised his understanding of sociological activity. Whilst not abandoning the general belief in value freedom, in an essay entitled 'Some problems confronting sociology as a profession', Parsons admitted that sociological activity encompassed several roles (Parsons, 1959).<sup>6</sup> Unlike his contemporaries Mills and later Gouldner, Friedrichs' writings on the role of the sociologist did not make Parsons a target of criticism but revealed traces of the omnipresent power of the Parsonian paradigm at the time. Friedrichs' mapping out the development of US sociology from the 1940s up to the late 1960s, and his analysis of the role of the sociologist, showed some limited historical sensitivity (Friedrichs, 1970). As Friedrichs' sociology of sociology is chiefly a sympathetic engagement with the world of Talcott Parsons, it

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst Parsons had founded a sub-committee on 'Ethics of the profession' in the American Sociological Association in 1960, value freedom did not cease to be the ultimate target of functional sociologists (Friedrichs, 1970).

is also a documentation of Parsons' influence on the common conceptualisation of sociological activity at the time in the US (Holmwood, 1996)<sup>7</sup>.

In the 1970s, Merton took conflicting norms in sociological life as the point of departure for his studies into the structure of the social role of the sociologist. Merton delineates the multiple roles encompassed by sociological activity in the university as follows: 'The position of a university professor or scientist in a research organization has variously multiple roles associated with it: the roles of teaching or training, of research, administration, and so on. [...] [T]he demands of these several roles in the one status can be at odds. Not only do they make competing demands for time, energy, and interest upon the occupants of the one status, but the kinds of attitudes, values, and activities required by each of these roles may also be incompatible with the others' (Merton, 1976: 10). Merton does not conceive sociological work as a unified stream of activity, but as a set of activities that might even be opposed to each other. Whilst his acknowledgement of the interplay of conflating sociological activities may prevent us from portraying an ideal type of sociologist who acts consistently on all dimensions, it finally leaves us with ambivalence as to how a state of so-called 'sociological ambivalence' can be resolved.

The real breakthrough concerning the discourse on the role of the sociologist in society was made with C. Wright Mills' 'The Sociological Imagination' in 1959

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrichs failed to take a clear position between the priestly mode – Parsons – and the prophetic one – Gouldner and Mills. Even though he raised his voice several times for a more prophet-like position of sociology in support of Mills or Gouldner, he finally seemed to have a stronger leaning on the Parsonian side of the spectrum even though it is not clear why he criticises one value-laden direction, like Marxism, and not others.

(Mills, 1959). Mills thereby set an enormous counterpart to the functionalist mainstream of the neutral role of the researcher (Mills, 1959). Mills' credo of making 'personal troubles into public issues' urged sociologists not to draw boundaries between the allegedly professional and personal domains. Mills's own intersection between the public and the private has been the subject of extensive analysis (Brewer, 2005; Eldridge, 1983; Horowitz, 1962; Horowitz, 1983). According to Friedrichs, Mills was one of the prophets during a very priestly period in sociology in the 1950s (Friedrichs, 1970). Mills' mission, like Alvin Gouldner's ten year later, was to attack the sociological establishment and to criticise the increasing professionalisation of sociology. Similarly to Friedrichs, Calhoun and VanAntwerpen (2007) consider Mills' major book as a documentation of his self-understanding as a prophet and saviour of sociology.<sup>8</sup> Mills complained that sociology had become less a creative ethos and a manner of orientation than a set of science machines operated by technicians. He particularly criticised the fetishisation of quantitative methods in sociology, arguing that science can never be value-free and extra-social: 'Sociologists should seek first of all to situate themselves within the conflicting bodies that coursed through the particular setting of which they were a part. Then, using the most sophisticated tools of empirical analysis available (which would include biography and comparative historical studies), they should direct their sociological imaginations to the task of unraveling the subtle and not-so-subtle dynamics of power and privilege therein' (Mills, 2000: 7). Mills' program for creating a kind of sociology that was more aware of its historical foundations is

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<sup>8</sup> As Mills reportedly wrote in a letter to a friend shortly before the publication of 'The Sociological Imagination', he saw himself '[...] as [...] a prophet who comes in from the desert' (Geary, 2004: 232 cited in Calhoun and VanAntwerpen, 2007: 383).

indebted to his readings of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. According to Friedrichs, 'Mills was a political activist and a polemicist in a period when professional sociologists were more concerned with establishing their discipline as an objective science and institutionalising it in the universities than they were with saying something important about the world and making what they said effective in the arenas of political combat' (Friedrichs, 1970: 90). Following Chriss, Mills' work had a lot of impact on the New Left in the US and the development of social movements (Chriss, 1999), even though he himself took a pragmatic approach towards Marx, being convinced that Marx should be transcended both as a model for a science of society and as an ideological base.<sup>9</sup> This may in part explain his ultimate reluctance towards promoting a stronger connection between theory and practice and considering sociological analysis as a basis for political action. Furthermore, there is indication for Mills only having partly lived up to his own programmatic promise of engaging with current problems. Chriss and Read point out that Mills did not engage with the major challenges of his time, namely, the second-wave feminist movement and the anti-racism movement (Chriss, 1999; Reed, 2007). In his autobiographical writings, Mills himself commented on this gap, pointing out that he was otherwise preoccupied (Mills and Mills, 2000).<sup>10</sup> Besides, as Calhoun and VanAntwerpen argue, whilst Mills criticised the sociological establishment, he was more confined to a classical understanding of sociology itself, not engaging with alternative trends in sociology, such as gender studies or more interdisciplinary approaches (Calhoun

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9 In this respect, his relationship with Marxism can be labelled in a similar way as Gouldner's who makes his criticism of Marxism to the subject of his inquiry in 'Against Fragmentation' more than twenty years later (Gouldner, 1985).

10 Mills: 'The point is I have never been interested in what is called 'the Negro problem'. Perhaps I should have been and should be now. The truth is, I've never looked into it as a researcher. I have a feeling that it would be 'a white problem' and I've got enough of those on my hands just now' (Mills, cited in Mills and Mills, 2000: 314).

and VanAntwerpen, 2007). To conclude, Mills' work is still of crucial significance for the conceptualisation of sociological work. As Stanley notes, 'it has become fashionable to invoke C. Wright Mills on the sociological imagination as a central device for sociology, as a relatively acceptable and unproblematic means of indicating areas of agreement about a unifying "it" of the discipline' (Stanley, 2005: 5.1).<sup>11</sup> Yet, the frequent and often uncritical reference to Mills' work raises the question of whether his popularity is partly rooted in his work's lack of a radical edge (Calhoun and VanAntwerpen, 2007). Nevertheless, as Mills serves as a major figure of identification for many of my interviewees and provides a helpful resource in understanding processes of sociological becoming, we will come back to his work in 'Sociological Becomings'.

Whilst Mills wanted sociologists to create a closer link between the personal and the public, he did not discuss the implications of sociologists' failure to establish such a link and to aim for a good relationship between theory and practice. This is accomplished in a much more refined manner by Alvin Gouldner (Gouldner, 1970). Gouldner argues that critical sociology has to be radical in its conceptualisation. A radical sociology would be a moral sociology that aims for a transformation of the outside world, but also, and chiefly, for a transformation of the sociologist herself. Following Gouldner, the outline of what it means to be a critical sociologist could never be a static undertaking, but needed to be continuously revisited (Gouldner, 1970). As Gouldner theorises sociological activity as the combination of ontological

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<sup>11</sup> As Stanley further notes, Mills' current popularity '[...] is of course deeply ironic, given the division and dissention that it was greeted with when first published' (Stanley, 2005: footnote 16).

and epistemological dimensions, his framework will serve us as our main point of departure for our investigations into the self-understanding of sociologists.

Whilst all of the accounts discussed so far have been a product of American sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu's work on sociology and reflexivity represents a central European exception to that. Crossing continents, Bryant sees Bourdieu as part of the group of 'the new sociologists,' whose main representatives he cites as Mills and Gouldner (Bryant, 1970). Similarly, Calhoun and VanAntwerpen discussed the work of Gouldner, Mills and Bourdieu in relation to each other, pointing to their commonalities in challenging mainstream sociology (Calhoun and VanAntwerpen, 2007). Bourdieu does not consider the sociology of sociology as one specialism among others, but as a precondition for any kind of sociological pursuit. As the scientist is embedded in society, her sociological work also encompasses various other roles apart from a purely scientific one: 'The socialized body (what is called the individual or the person) is not opposed to society; it is one of its forms of existence' (Bourdieu, 1993: 15). In fact, for Bourdieu, self-analysis reveals the relationship between intellectual ideas and cultural and economic structures. Bourdieu has extensively done this in his work, analysing French universities in the 1960s (Bourdieu, 1988). 'Homo academicus' provides an excellent insight into power relations and the functions of the faculty in French universities of the 1960s (Bourdieu, 1988). However, whilst he analyses power relations in universities, he does not pay much attention to the economic conditions underpinning it, thereby understating the significant relationship between material conditions and the intellectual shape of the discipline. Moreover, Bourdieu hardly ever mentions gender



relations as an important issue of analysis. Bourdieu's leaving aside the sociologist's potentially transformative role further raises the question of whether his reflexivity project was ultimately carried out for its own sake, although this also seems to be at odds with Bourdieu's mission to prevent the sociology of sociology from becoming an end in itself (Adkins, 2003). As Bourdieu outlined, '[u]nless it is assumed that the social history of social science has no other function than to give social science researchers reasons for existing, and that it needs no other justification, we have to ask, whether it has any importance for today's scientific practice' (Bourdieu, 1993: 50). Hence, where self-reflexive skills would have mattered the most, namely, in an analysis of academia and sociologists, to my mind, Bourdieu could have lived up to his own promises much more. For all these reasons, Bourdieu's work does not seem to be suitable as an overall theoretical framework for our study into the self-understanding of sociologists in England.

Finally moving to the UK, we would like to shed light on the work of Anthony Giddens and Margaret Archer in its potential suitability as theoretical frameworks for our endeavours. Giddens' intellectual efforts concerning reflexivity culminated in publications such as 'Reflexive Modernisation' together with Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash in the 1990s (Beck and Giddens and Lash, 1994). Within this triad of 'reflexive sociologists,' his notion of reflexive modernisation became a vanguard for social theory in the 1990s. Yet, the foundations for this were set much earlier in 'New Rules of Sociological Method', where Giddens described the relationship between the social scientist and her research as a double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1976). Whereas reflexivity existed in pre-modern times, modernity can be

characterised as a period where reflection reaches a full level, as reflection also includes the level of reflection itself.<sup>12</sup> According to Giddens, thought and action are thereby always related back to each other: ‘There is a fundamental sense in which reflexivity is a defining characteristic of all human action. All human beings routinely ‘keep in touch’ with the grounds of what they do as an integral element of doing it. I have called this elsewhere the ‘reflexive monitoring of action,’ using the phrase to draw attention to the chronic character of the processes involved’ (Giddens, 1990: 36). As Giddens explicitly mentions himself, reflexivity can be understood as an automated process and as a condition of modernity. Yet, within that, sociology would take a ‘pivotal position’ that derives ‘from its role as the most generalised type of reflection upon modern social life’ (Giddens, 1990: 41). Giddens further elaborates: ‘The discourse of sociology and the concepts, theories and findings of the other social sciences continually ‘circulate in and out’ of what it is that they are about. In so doing, they reflexively restructure their subject matter, which itself has learned to think sociologically. Modernity is itself deeply and intrinsically sociological’ (Giddens, 1990: 43). As in a world of uncertain knowledge, the sociologist as an enlightened expert only seems to be one step ahead of the ‘lay person’ who already finds her self in a sociological world, for Giddens, this has an effect on sociology and the status of sociological knowledge itself. Yet, as O’Brien counters, the different ways in which reflexivity is used in Giddens’ work give rise to questions about the relationship between reflexivity, rationality and agency: ‘[...] To what extent is the everyday world the *sine qua non* of reflexive

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<sup>12</sup> Giddens’ conception of reflexivity as an omnipresent condition in modernity that differs from pre-modern societies has been widely criticised as unjustified as an overall attempt of generalising traditional societies and not distinguishing between different periods of modernity itself (Mouzelis, 1999).

activity and how does this world produce reflexivity as a normative orientation?’ (O’Brien, 1999: 8). Mouzelis conceives Giddens’ notion of reflexivity as ‘overactivistic’, suggesting that subjects would constantly find themselves in ‘means-ends situations’, making decisions’ (Mouzelis, 1999: 85). Giddens seems to see reflexivity as a consequence of the times we live in, rather than as a conscious process that we need to seek to engage in. Taking this further for our investigations into the profession of sociologists, in a Giddensian world unreflexive sociology and sociologists would be a logical impossibility. Left without any outline of how reflexivity could be implemented into sociology, nor what it empirically consists of, Giddens’ theoretical work does not prove particularly helpful as a theoretical tool for our endeavour of comparing sociologists’ aspirations to their practices.

With reflexivity being considered a default mode of being human, Archer’s preoccupation with reflexivity raises problems similar to those associated with Giddens. Though trained by Bourdieu, Archer’s long-standing preoccupation with reflexivity (Archer, 2003; Archer, 2007) shows hardly any resemblance with the work of her previous teacher. In her investigations on the connection between structure and agency, Archer developed the idea of reflexivity as the necessary mediation between structure and agency. For Archer, reflexivity is accomplished by the internal conversation: ‘This is the modality through which reflexivity towards self, society and the relationship between them is exercised. In itself it entails just such things as articulating to ourselves where we are placed, ascertaining where our interests lie and adumbrating schemes of future action’ (Archer, 2003: 9). Since the mediation between structure and agency is a precondition of being human, we are

reflexive by our human nature. Taking this further to our case of sociological activity, this would mean that reflexivity runs through all our activities. Based on empirical research, Archer develops a typology of reflexives that differ from each other in the degree to which they use internal conversation as a way of evaluating their practices. The type of reflexive that comes closest to what we are interested in, namely academic activity, is the meta-reflexive (Archer, 2007). Yet, the major problem with Archer's notion of reflexivity for our purposes is that it, like Giddens', does not specify what reflexivity really involves and what the consequences of not having an internal conversation are.

As we have seen from the preceding analysis, what comes under the banner of reflexivity is of varied nature.<sup>13</sup> With reflexivity having been used in a rather inflationary way in the social sciences and humanities, O'Brien stated that the notion of reflexivity is used in an almost equally confusing manner as the concept of lifestyle (O'Brien, 1999). Yet, the rise of publications on reflexivity may also be due to the cultural turn and postmodernity. This can be seen in contributions such as Ashmore's 'The Reflexive Thesis' (Ashmore, 1989) and in Steve Woolgar's work (Woolgar, 1988). Ashmore's thesis was an inquiry into the problems and possibilities of a reflexive sociology of (scientific) knowledge that he undertook by studying reflexive sociologists and their approaches towards a sociology of

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<sup>13</sup> In writing about Gouldner, Stanley summarised different forms of reflexivity: 'Steve Woolgar (1988) has termed 'constitutive reflexivity' and 'benign introspection'. Bruno Latour (1988) has referred to a 'meta-reflexivity' and 'infra-reflexivity'. Stanley (1990) has dubbed 'descriptive reflexivity' and 'analytical reflexivity'. Pierre Bourdieu (1992) has discussed it as 'participant objectification' and 'biography'. Tim May (1999) has called it 'endogamous reflexivity' and 'referential reflexivity'. Scott Lash (1994) has referred to it as 'cognitive reflexivity', 'aesthetic reflexivity' and 'hermeneutic reflexivity' (Stanley, 2000: 71). In line with Stanley, it is important to note that these forms of reflexivity are not entirely distinct from each.

sociology. For Ashmore, the reflexivity of inquiry into inquiry is not a problem in itself, but a constituent part of any inquiry. In the light of the meta-science paradox, Ashmore suggests reformulating the research problem of studying sociology as a sociologist. Yet, with his analysis being located on a meta-meta level of reflexivity, the question of the epistemological and ontological status of these theoretical objects arises.<sup>14</sup> Ashmore's investigations into sociologists seem to be a meta-project rather than an engagement with the role of the sociologist on a theoretical and empirical level.

For the discourse on reflexivity during the 1990s, we can further observe a move towards an engagement with methodological issues. This is reflected in numerous contributions to research methodology and attempts to ingrain the role of the researcher in the process of research and writing up in a so-called reflexive way (Alvesson and Skoeldberg, 2000; Burawoy, 2003; Davies, 2008; Dressel and Langreiter, 2003; May, 1999; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). These discussions of reflexivity mostly revolve around qualitative methods, whereas quantitative methods and reflexivity issues seem to be associated less frequently (Ryan and Golden, 2006). What is at the core of these discussions is an analysis of how the relationship between researcher and researcher unfolds in the research situation and impacts on the analysis. Yet, whilst these contributions are useful, they mostly emphasise only specific aspects of sociological work – namely, the research process and the process of writing – whilst other areas remain untouched. Without doubt, one of the most important achievements of reflexive sociology projects of the last thirty years is the

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<sup>14</sup> We will provide a more detailed discussion of Ashmore's interpretation of the meta-science paradox in 'Challenges and Implications of Studying One's Own Profession'.

institutionalisation of research ethics. Sociologists' thinking about ethical limitations and potential of their research suggests that they acknowledge having social responsibility as researchers, both in the way they conduct it as well as in how they communicate their results to the public (Bryman, 2008). Yet, whilst this is institutionally reflected in the implementation of ethical codes and ethics committees (British Sociological Association, 2002; Dench and Iphofen and Huws, 2004), research ethics in its current practice in places resembles a manifestation of political correctness and seems to become overly regulated (Richardson and McMullan, 2007; Vujakovic and Bullard, 2001).<sup>15</sup>

The increase in publications on researchers and their (auto)biographies, as well as the more frequent employment of auto-biographic modes of writing, can also be seen as a result of the reflexive turn. With regard to autobiographical writing, sociologists have been trying to make sense of sociological activity and the role of the sociologist from different perspectives, focusing on sociologists and their autobiographical accounts in particular countries – mostly the US (Berger, 2005; Glassner and Hertz, 2003; Horowitz, 1970b) – and specific periods of time, paying attention to the development of sociology after WWII (Fleck, 1996), the processes of sociological becoming during 1968 and sociological activity at the time (Sica and Turner, 2005), or analysing the sociologist from a more globalised point of view (Deflem, 2007). Whilst some of these contributions relate the actor and her work to a specific period of time and space, thereby putting forward a sociology-of-knowledge

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<sup>15</sup> This has recently been countered by Adam Hedgecoe. He studied ethnographic data from research ethics committees in the UK and investigated how these bodies assess applications from social scientists. Hedgecoe comes to the conclusion that ethics committees have been less prescriptive than is sometimes suggested and that they are not inherently hostile to social science research and in particular to qualitative research (Hedgecoe, 2008)

approach (Fleck, 1996; Sica and Turner, 2005), more often than not, autobiographical collections on sociologists do not add much to a thorough analysis of sociological activity and the development of social thought and practice. Autobiographies frequently do not go beyond a narcissistically-motivated analysis of one's own work, and remain limited in their outlook. Being a prototype of this kind, Homans notes in the preface to his book 'Coming to my senses. The autobiography of a sociologist' that one of the reasons why he wrote his autobiography is that '[...] I enjoy writing, especially about my favorite subject, myself' (Homans, 1984).

Within the context of methodological changes, autobiographical writing has experienced a revival and can be considered as another dimension through which we can observe rising sensitivity for reflexivity issues (Cosslett and Lury and Summerfield, 2000; Stanley, 1992). Autobiographies or autobiographical writing seem to be a first step towards acknowledging the intertwining of history and our lives, and therefore our research agendas, rather than seeing sociology as an ahistorical endeavour. It means that the theories we produce are an outcome of our social lives and political contexts, and are directly shaped by them. Yet, hardly ever can it be seen what kind of substantive sociological insight an increased process of undressing one's inner feelings about one's research and the connection to one's biography amount to. It seems that sociological methodology becomes another stage for the presentation of the self and a second-order expression for the individualisation processes of society that have finally reached sociology and sociologists. After all, what is missing in these attempts at reflexivity are mechanisms by which these confessions and aspirations can be held accountable on

the dimension of sociological practice. This may be an expression of what Gouldner wanted to prevent when he mentioned that radical or critical sociology should not become another sub-sociology (Gouldner, 1970). Dismantling current self-reflexivity discourses, elements emerge that cannot be labeled as anything other than narcissistic: 'There are ways that do not touch and quicken us but may, instead, deaden us to the disorders we bear; by allowing us to talk about them with a ventriloquist's voice, they only create an illusion of self-confrontation that serves to disguise a new form of self-celebration' (Gouldner, 1970: 489).

Another level of engagement with the role of the sociologist is the analysis of professional associations. For the UK, Platt provided a history of the British Sociological Association (Platt, 2003). Her investigations inform the reader about the empirical development of the discipline's professional association. However, beyond that, Platt's analysis of the British Sociological Association is disappointing, as it does not shed light on the association's role in informing and shaping the discipline in its intellectual development as it did in the analysis of other countries' professional associations.<sup>16</sup>

As shown in this chapter, the theoretical approaches discussed cannot be considered suitable to serve as a framework for analysing the self-understanding of sociologists in England. The explanatory gap of these approaches consists in their focus on selected dimensions of sociological activity, instead of providing a more comprehensive framework. Furthermore, some of these contributions conceptualised

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the Austrian Sociological Association see Fleck, 2002.



the role of the sociologist based on a segregation of scholarly and personal roles, treating sociologists as value-neutral actors. Other approaches had elaborated on reflexivity in rather abstract terms, detached from the realities of sociological practice. Furthermore, other representatives only emphasised methodological reflexivity, not paying any attention to the connection between theory and practice itself. Hence, all of these approaches turned out to be unsuitable, as they did not analyse the sociologist in a holistic manner, linking ontological and epistemological dimensions.

## **2.2    *Theorising the Link between Social Theory, the Sociological Calling and Sociological Practice***

A sociologist whose work embraces all these elements and will therefore inform my research into the self-understanding of sociologists is Alvin Gouldner. In the following, I will discuss Gouldner's outline of Reflexive Sociology. Critically assessing Gouldner also means employing Gouldner's own tools of critique and looking beyond him (Steinmetz and Chae, 2002). I will do this by setting his work in relation to the writings of sociologists who are equally concerned with a holistic analysis of sociological activity. The work of Patricia Hill Collins, Wolf Lepenies, Michael Burawoy, C. Wright Mills and Liz Stanley will be discussed in its potential enrichment of Gouldner's outline. This procedure will foster a discourse on an all-encompassing understanding of sociological work and life that will thereafter provide the basis of my empirical research.

Gouldner, who was trained at Columbia University and supervised by Robert Merton, spent the first half of his career occupied with professional sociology, before devoting himself to the sociology of knowledge and an analysis of his own discipline (Calhoun and VanAntwerpen, 2007; Chriss, 1999). Gouldner presented 'Enter Plato' as the first study in a historical series of sociologies of social science (Gouldner, 1967). The idea underlying Gouldner's analysis of ancient Greek times was to demonstrate how macrosocial conditions play out in the ideas of a specific intellectual in a specific historical time and place (Camic and Gross, 2002). According to Camic and Gross, 'Enter Plato' can be seen as a '[...] turning point in the history of the sociology of knowledge. With this book, the field attained precisely the kind of integration of theory and empirical analysis (and openness to the study of the contents of the ideas of specific intellectuals) that Merton had previously called for – and that, after the long fallow period that followed (ca. 1970-1990s), has characterized its recent reincarnation as the sociology of ideas' (Camic and Gross, 2002: 104). Yet, Camic and Gross see the only drawback of 'Enter Plato' in Gouldner's vagueness concerning an outline of the processes through which social conditions are mediated from the macro level to the level of the individual (Camic and Gross, 2002). Whilst 'Enter Plato' represented Gouldner's most empirical piece of sociology of knowledge, his theorisation of the role of experientially-based 'background assumptions' in shaping a thinker's work came much more to the foreground in 'The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology' (Camic and Gross, 2002; Steinmetz and Chae, 2002). Here, Gouldner moves from an analysis of social theory and its emergence in ancient Greece to an analysis of the intertwining of social theory and practice with the political surroundings at the time.

With his critique of sociology centering on functionalism and positivism, his writings resemble Mill's 'The Sociological Imagination' (Chriss, 1999). He exposed value-free sociology as a myth and argued that in at least three areas – the selection of problems, the preferences for certain hypotheses and the choice of certain conceptual schemes – the intrusion of one's personal values is unavoidable (Gouldner, 1970). His main argument was that even in a so-called value-free sociology, values are expressed; but instead of doing this overtly and consciously, this would happen covertly by associating the existing system with goodness (Gouldner, 1973: 485). In fact, Gouldner argues that the value-free doctrine '...had a paradoxical potentiality: it might enable men to make better value judgements rather than none' (Gouldner, 1973: 11). Segregating personal from professional roles would also have implications for how theory relates to practise, disregarding the mutual connectedness of facts and values. According to Gouldner, all of these problems were epitomised in Parsonian functionalism. As functionalism could be anticipated to extinguish the dominant paradigm (and was actually already doing so at the time of his writing), Gouldner sought alternatives. For him, making ourselves and sociology the subjects of scrutiny would constitute the precondition for gaining knowledge of the outside world (Gouldner, 1970).

Analysing social theorists, Gouldner wants to understand the work and the people who crystallise the 'collective conscience' of the sociological community: 'Starting with the very primitive assumption that theory is made by the praxis of men in all their wholeness and is shaped by the lives they lead, and pursuing this into concrete empirical contexts, one is led to a very different conception of what generates social

theory and of what it is that many theorists are trying to do' (Gouldner, 1970: 483). Similarly to Mills, he suggested that being a sociologist is a life-encompassing activity that cannot be discarded at the doors of a university.<sup>17</sup> According to Gouldner, every social theory has two aspects: '[...] its explicit assumptions, or 'postulations,' and its background assumptions. Background assumptions include broad 'world hypotheses' – metaphysical assumptions about the world in general – as well as the more limited premises that Gouldner calls 'domain assumptions'. The latter are premises about a particular 'domain' such as society or the individual. Crucially, domain assumptions are *affectively* laden because they are inculcated early in socialization, prior to the 'intellectual age of consent', in Gouldner's memorable formulation (1970, p. 32)' (Steinmetz and Chae, 2002: 115). The central argument of Gouldner is that the production or choice of any social theory necessarily depends on 'certain prior assumptions about society and men, and indeed, certain feelings about and relations to society and men' (Gouldner, 1970: 28). For Gouldner, domain assumptions would be 'intellectually consequential' and 'theory-shaping,' but not because they 'rest on evidence nor even because they are provable' (Gouldner, 1970: 35). As domain assumptions shape the development of theory by making scientists sympathise emotionally with certain theories and not others, every social theory has to be both understood as a personal theory as well as a tacit theory of politics (Steinmetz and Chae, 2002: 115). Hence, these are equally the assumptions the social theorist is socialised into.

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<sup>17</sup> This connection between social theory and material conditions was first outlined by C. Wright Mills, whose sociology of knowledge heavily drew on Mannheim. Yet, according to Chriss, Gouldner hardly ever refers to Mills in his own work, as this would have probably given his own work, and in particular his 'Reflexive Sociology,' a less innovative status (Chriss, 1999).

This process of awareness of ourselves in our totality in relation to our research and the outside world is at the core of Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology program. What makes his work so distinctive and makes it suitable for our purposes is that it is an epistemological position with practical and political implications. For him, Reflexive Sociology '[it] is characterized, rather, by the relationship it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the man performing it. A Reflexive Sociology embodies a critique of the conventional conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist's relation to his work' (Gouldner, 1970: 495). As Stanley comments, 'Gouldner's concern is with a moral epistemology, encompassing foundational aspects of sociological claims to know, to possess knowledge, and how this impacts on sociological understanding of the dynamics of power and the constitution of structure within society' (Stanley, 2000: 57). Gouldner's understanding of reflexivity radically differs from the other notions of reflexivity that I introduced earlier, and that can be summarised as keeping an ontological and epistemological analysis separate from each other. Recognising the link between the material conditions of the sociologist within academia and her sociological activity, and especially her theoretical background, this aspect seems to make Gouldner's work particularly suitable as an analytical tool for our study in the self-understanding of sociologists. For Gouldner, the outline of what it means to be a critical sociologist can never be a static undertaking and needs to be continually revisited (Gouldner, 1970).<sup>18</sup> Gouldner accomplished this in his analysis of the growing convergence

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that just as being reflexive does not necessarily imply having a critical agenda in mind, not all claims of critique are necessarily based on reflexivity. For Gouldner, however, reflexivity and critique need to be thought of together, and only in this togetherness can they qualify for being labelled as reflexive sociological activity.

between Functionalism and Marxism. He accused Marxist sociologists of being in a static relationship with their theory, of not living up to their strong theoretical claims of critique and not questioning the foundations of their thought (Gouldner, 1970). In revisiting Marxism from a critical perspective, Gouldner considered himself a 'reflexive Marxist' (Jay, 1982). Gouldner saw open-mindedness for hostile information as a strategy that prevents us from getting lost in dogmatic thought: 'A Reflexive Sociology can grasp hostile information: all the powers-that-be are inimical to the highest ideals of sociology' (Gouldner, 1970: 499). It is in this respect that Gouldner can also be seen as a true promoter of free intellectual thought, and of synthesis in a Comteian sense.<sup>19</sup>

Taking Gouldner's position as a main source to rethink sociological activity for our times must not be mistaken as an attempt to transfer his ideas in a literal sense. Rather, Gouldner's major credo for critical self-inquiry is an open invitation to critique his work in all our undertakings. Therefore, in the light of his outline being an epistemological position, aiming to re-think a holistic framework of sociological activity for today that is informed by Gouldnerian ideas, means to extract the main features of his work, to use them as analytical tools and set them in relation to current thought and current conditions.

In the light of Gouldner's strong claims, we also have to investigate how reflexive Gouldner himself was of the social and political conditions of his time. In fact,

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<sup>19</sup> Intellectual permeability and the rigid questioning of one's standpoint feature prominently in Steve Fuller's work and his research program of Social Epistemology, evoking memories of a Gouldnerian outline of a sociology of knowledge (Fuller, 2002a; Fuller 2005; Fuller, 2006).

Gouldner is reported not to have put much attention to the social movements of his time – feminism, the anti-racism movement and Black Power in the US. Reed sees Gouldner as part of a generation of social theorists that was preoccupied with issues of socioeconomic change and inequalities concerning social class rather than with connecting this analysis with gender and race (Reed, 2006). In today's terminology, Gouldner could be called politically incorrect due to these analytical shortcomings (Chriss, 1999). Speaking with Gouldner himself, we could state that the main reason for his analytical neglect of feminism and racism is that an engagement with these phenomena would have probably disentangled Gouldner's own so-called 'dominant assumptions'. In a slightly different manner from Reed, Martin Hammersley also accuses Gouldner of not having been as reflexive as he claimed to be. Whilst emphasising the importance of the even questioning one's own beliefs, Hammersley argues that Gouldner '[...] is inconsistently reflexive, preserving his own position from the corrosive effects of the kind of sociological analysis he applies in criticising others' (Hammersley, 1999: 1). More specifically, Hammersley accuses Gouldner of treating 'the discipline as supplying a reflexive perspective on social life that will lead political action towards the realization of Enlightenment ideals' (Hammersley, 1999: 1). There are no grounds for sociology, according to Hammersley, to put forward certain value positions as right and critical. Instead of offering 'self-sufficient answers to questions about 'what's wrong?' or 'what is to be done?'' (Hammersley, 1999: 1), sociology should be more modest in its claims and should confine itself to the provision of factual knowledge. However, this leaves Hammersley with no more than the deconstruction of knowledge and its conditions.

Thinking with Gouldner and Mills, an outline of what it means to be a critical sociologist, also needs to pay more attention to the connection between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of sociological activity. Both scholars emphasised the intertwining of historical, biographical and structural dimensions in their impact on our self-understanding as sociologists as well as on our practice. Yet, in doing that, both stuck to a male, white and middle-class perception of life that was taken as the universally valid manifestation of the enlightened sociologist (Reed, 2006). In contrast to the work of male sociologists who were occupied with issues of reflexivity and are credited with this (Burawoy, 2005; Gouldner, 1970; Giddens, 1976; Giddens, 1990), feminist sociologists are less praised for their contribution to reflexive sociology. Whereas feminist research is tacitly reflexive, making positionality the core of its analysis (Stanley, 1990), a lot of research claims to apply to all social groups, pretending to be objective but neglecting women's perspectives and female contexts of living. It is therefore important to point to the contributions of feminist sociology, in particular feminist sociology of knowledge and Patricia Hill Collins' work. This will also enable us to confer a feminist dimension to Gouldner's analysis.

Standpoint theorists like Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith or Nancy Hartsock argue for feminist research that is '[...] not only located in, but proceeding from, the grounded analysis of women's material realities' (Stanley, 1990: 25). For Liz Stanley, 'feminism' is not merely a 'perspective', a way of seeing; nor even this plus an epistemology, a way of knowing; it is also an ontology, or a way of being in the world' (Stanley, 1990: 14). Yet, feminists accuse mainstream sociology not only



of not integrating gender into their work, but also of not considering their own situatedness as researchers and roles in life in the research process. Gouldner and Mills have emphasised the importance of taking into account the researcher's relationship with the outside world in her research and position in life, yet without ever explicitly mentioning gender. Nevertheless, it is this tacit inclusion or exclusion of gender that finally conceals gender relations and sheds a very different light on the world. From a feminist sociologist's view, an essential reflection process only takes place when full tribute is paid to the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the sociologist's position and the attribution of her standpoints to socialisation processes. Liz Stanley has been promoting a closer consideration of the links between our autobiography and our research and the intertwining effects, thus giving more importance to our 'intellectual autobiography' (Stanley, 1990). For Dorothy Smith, 'the first difficulty is that how sociology is thought – its methods, conceptual schemes and theories – has been based on and built up within the male social universe (even when women have participated in its doing). It has taken for granted not just that scheme of relevances as an itemized inventory of issues or subject matters (industrial sociology, political sociology, social stratification, etc.) but the fundamental social and political structures under which these become relevant and are ordered' (Smith, 1974: 7).<sup>20</sup> It is by providing a critique of sociology that feminist sociology can be regarded as a reflexive project that is of particular relevance to our endeavour.

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<sup>20</sup> In this respect, feminist sociologists find themselves on nearly equal terrain with reflexive sociologists like Gouldner, Bourdieu and Mills, who have harshly criticised positivism and empiricism for presuming value-neutrality in research and negating the relationship and effects between the researcher and the researched.

The sociologist whose sociology of knowledge radically challenged monolithic views and maintained the analytical link between the ontological and the epistemological is Patricia Hill Collins (Hill Collins, 1986; Hill Collins, 2000; Hill Collins, 2005; Hill Collins, 2007 a). Elaborating on her own sociological becoming, Hill Collins discusses how her being black, female and working-class impacted on the development of her sociological work – in her reading of social theory and as a sociologist in a university. ‘Being an outsider within’, she describes how being marginalised as a black woman also made her more sceptical with regard to theories that were written from a ruling and mainstream standpoint (Hill Collins, 1986, Hill Collins, 2005). Going back to Mannheim and Simmel, Hill Collins argues that ‘strangers in academia’, ‘marginal intellectuals’ play an important role in academia by means of ‘the critical posture such individuals bring to academic endeavors’ that ‘may be essential to the creative development of academic disciplines themselves’ (Hill Collins, 1986: 15). Hill Collins describes how ‘black women have long occupied marginal positions in academic settings. I argue that many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality – their ‘outsider within’ status – to produce Black feminist thought that reflects a special standpoint on self, family and society’ (Hill Collins, 1986: 14). Without essentialising being black in its effect on intellectual knowledge production, Hill Collins outlines the positive effects that paying more attention to marginalised bodies of knowledge could have: ‘Sociologists benefit greatly from serious consideration of the emerging, cross-disciplinary literature that I label Black feminist thought, precisely because, for many Afro-American female intellectuals, ‘marginality’ has been an excitement to creativity. As outsiders within, Black feminist scholars may be one of many distinct

groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints promise to enrich contemporary sociological discourse. Bringing this group – as well as others who share an outsider within status vis-à-vis sociology – into the center of analysis may reveal aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches’ (Hill Collins, 1986: 15). From this point of view, Hill Collins’ conception of marginality as an excitement for creativity speaks truth to the sociological tradition as being open-minded and interdisciplinary. Leading this back to Gouldner and his credo of critically questioning our own beliefs and positions, it may well be that his dominant assumptions would become threatened by engaging with her viewpoints. However, Hill Collins vividly demonstrates the necessity of challenging not only a body of knowledge, but also sociological practice itself. Bringing Hill Collins’ and Gouldner’s work together, we benefit from integrating the triad of gender, race and post-colonialism into Gouldner’s work, leaving his strictly universalist manner of speaking behind.

With Michael Burawoy’s 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association ‘For Public Sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005), we encounter what I would call a more current engagement with the ideas of Alvin Gouldner and their relevance to sociologists in current times. The following discussion of Burawoy’s ideas of public sociology in relation to Gouldner’s Reflexive Sociology will therefore allow us to shift a discussion of Gouldner’s work to current times and the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century Higher Education structures.

What Burawoy accomplished in much more detail than Alvin Gouldner is the analysis of how sociologists can actively transform themselves by shedding light on

their sociological practices. His article triggered a worldwide revival of the discourse on the sociologist's role in the discipline that had been slightly neglected since the 1970s. Gouldner's influence on Burawoy's thought becomes evident from the title of his presidential address – '*For Public Sociology*'. Like Gouldner in 1970, Burawoy diagnoses a crisis in current sociology. For him '[r]esponding to the growing gap between the sociological ethos and the world we study, the challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways' (Burawoy, 2005: 259). By means of bringing sociology to the public, Burawoy does not only aim for a public understanding of the social sciences, but also for a transformation of the public and of the sociologist herself. In this sense, Burawoy's project is, like Gouldner's, a political one. For Burawoy '[t]he questions 'knowledge for whom' and 'knowledge for what?' – define the fundamental character of our discipline. They not only divide sociology into four different types, but allow us to understand how each type is internally constructed' (Burawoy, 2005: 269). Professional, public, policy and critical sociology would function according to their own criteria: 'In the case of professional sociology the focus is on producing theories that correspond to the empirical world, in the case of policy sociology knowledge has to be 'practical' or 'useful', whereas with public sociology knowledge is based on consensus between sociologists and their publics, while for critical sociology truth is nothing without a normative foundation to guide it' (Burawoy, 2005: 276). Yet, Burawoy admits that these types do emerge in blurred and mixed versions. Besides distinguishing between instrumental and reflexive knowledge, Burawoy sets another reminder to Gouldner's work: 'I call the one type of knowledge instrumental knowledge, whether it be the puzzle-solving of professional sociology or the problem-solving of

policy sociology. I call the other reflexive knowledge because it is concerned with a dialogue about ends, whether the dialogue takes place within the academic community about the foundations of its research programs or between academics and various publics about the direction of society. Reflexive knowledge interrogates the value premises of society as well as of our profession' (Burawoy, 2005: 276). Hence, like Gouldner, Burawoy emphasises the necessity to conduct ourselves as sociologists in such a way that we can live up to the 'value premises of our profession' as he puts it. This involves an engagement with the public. For Burawoy, sociologists should also play a political role, although he acknowledges that '[t]he multiplicity of public sociologies reflects not only different publics but different value commitments on the part of sociologists. Public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence, other than the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology. If sociology actually supports more liberal or critical public sociologies that is a consequence of the evolving ethos of the sociological community' (Burawoy, 2005: 266).

In his eleventh thesis, Burawoy wants the sociologist to be a partisan, thereby making another reference to Gouldner's 'The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology'. Both enter the stage as potential saviours of civil society: 'If the standpoint of economics is the market and its expansion, and the standpoint of political science is the state and the guarantee of political stability, then the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology – and in particular its public face – defends the interests of humanity' (Burawoy, 2005: 287). Yet, while it is easy to state that sociology acts in

the interest of humanity, sociology is not always left-wing by definition. In this context, Abbott criticises Burawoy's underlying assumption of all public sociology necessarily being left-wing (Abbott, 2007). Similarly, other observers have objected that Burawoy's public sociology project and the almost blind trust in the mutual interaction with the public that he maps out as an educational process for both sociologists and the public(s), would suggest that public sociology is a normative and straightforward process (Holmwood, 2007)

Rather than arguing for one particular style of public engagement, Burawoy states that the different types of sociologies required multiple public sociologies: 'There are multiple public sociologies, reflecting different types of publics and multiple ways of accessing them. Traditional and organic public sociologies are two polar but complementary types. Publics can be destroyed but they can also be created. Some never disappear – our students are our first and captive public' (Burawoy, 2005: 263). In this respect, he conceives of students as our first audience and the university as the first public to approach.<sup>21</sup> There is another aspect of Burawoy's public sociology outline that seems to have been rather neglected in the numerous discussions of his work, namely, the significance Burawoy ascribes to taking into account material conditions in enabling us to pursue critical and public sociology: 'A distinction must be made between sociology and its internal division on the one side and sociologists and their trajectories on the other. The life of the sociologist is propelled by the mismatch of her or his sociological habitus and the structure of the disciplinary field as a whole' (Burawoy, 2005: 272). In this context he mentions

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<sup>21</sup> We will come back to this theme in the chapter 'On the Cultivation of Critique: Educating the Next Generation'.

academic working conditions, meaning that a big apparatus of academics in contingent labour is the basis on which academia functions. In a period of constant change in Higher Education there would be less consciousness of the fact that critical statements can only be made from the safety of a permanent job. He therefore argues that different working positions are connected with different types of sociology. While only long-term tenure would give one the freedom to follow one's intellect, doing public sociology could be more difficult for less established scholars. To conclude, we could observe a lot of common features in Burawoy's and Gouldner's approach to the role of the sociologist. The scapegoat has changed since the 1970s. The Cold War is over, the antagonism between Marxism and functionalism is long gone, with functionalism no longer playing such an important role. It would appear that the long-contested issue of value-freedom versus directedness of research has long ceased to heat up scientific conversation, with the exception of some hard-core value-freedom proponents. All in all, Burawoy's outline of public sociology seems to be a current operationalisation of Gouldnerian thought. Two areas are of particular importance in this context: the public outside and inside the university.

That said, attention needs to be drawn to the drawbacks of Gouldner's own project, as it is strongly based on the assumption that Western sociology is universally valid. As Steinmetz and Chae further explain: 'Gouldner's unproblematic references to the West and his relative inattention to the global sociocultural influences on intellectual production and styles of thought made it impossible for him to understand the systematic differences between European and North American

sociology – not to mention North American versus Latin American, Chinese, or South African sociology. Like the Parsonian approach he was ostensibly criticizing, Gouldner takes the United States as the ‘normal’ case and implicitly suggests that the rest of Western sociology will follow the same pattern’ (Steinmetz and Chae, 2002: 126). Yet, As Stanley has sufficiently demonstrated, the apparent US bias in Gouldner’s analysis does not prevent us from employing his analytical tools in other contexts, such as the UK (Stanley, 2000). Others criticised that Gouldner’s sociology of knowledge comes up short in analysing precisely how the social conditions of the US at the time of Gouldner’s analysis impacted the emergence of particular theories and practices (Steinmetz and Chae, 2002). In order to learn more about the intertwining of history, theory and practice in sociology and how it unfolds in the UK, we need to draw on additional resources. Wolf Lepenies’ work will help us in understanding the flexible nature of the discipline and its development of different traditions in various countries (Lepenies, 1988). Lepenies extensively worked on the emergence of particular national sociological traditions, thereby carefully interweaving the history of a country with its development of social thought. Going back to the origins of sociology, Lepenies describes sociology as a discipline that was leaning towards the arts of letters on the one hand and the natural sciences on the other (Lepenies, 1988). Whilst the divide between these paradigms of interpretativism and positivism are by no means as stark as they were at the time of the second Positivismusstreit and in the 1970s, sociologists would nevertheless be drawn towards one of these camps. Therefore, how sociologists relate to certain selective aspects of what is called sociology may be a result of not only their general worldview and inclinations, but also of the bodies of knowledge that informed and



shaped their thought prior to getting into sociology. Hence, processes of sociological becoming may be seen in the light of Lepenies' description of the development of the sociological tradition.

To summarise, what makes Gouldner's work so distinctive and suitable for our purposes is that it is an epistemological position with practical and political implications. Gouldner's major credo for critical self-inquiry in all our undertakings is an open invitation to critique his work and to relate it to the work of other scholars. Re-thinking a holistic outline of sociological activity for today that is informed by Gouldnerian ideas meant to extract the main features of his work as analytical tools and to set them in relation to current thought and current conditions. By comparing Gouldner with other like-minded theorists, we challenged his own thought. Bringing Hill Collins' and Gouldner's work together, we could inscribe the triad of gender, race and post-colonialism into Gouldner's work, leaving his universalist manner of speaking behind. The discussion of Burawoy's ideas of public sociology in relation to Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology allowed us to shift to the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century Higher Education structures. Finally, Lepenies' work was particularly useful in highlighting the intertwining of ontological and epistemological dimensions in the becoming of different national intellectual histories (Lepenies, 1988). Taking this further for our study, in the next section we will briefly explore the case of the becoming of British sociology.

### **2.3 *British Sociology***

What Gouldner did in ‘Enter Plato’ and in ‘The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology’ was an empirical analysis of the relationship between certain historical settings and the creation of social theory and social theorists within those. Despite our study addressing the self-understanding of sociologists in the UK, the literature we have analysed so far was mostly US-based. This was justified by a lack of sociology-of-sociology literature in the UK in the postwar period and the enormous influence of American Sociology on British scholars at the time (Halsey, 2004). However, since any analysis of the sociologist and her self-understanding cannot be seen in separation from the historical and current context of the discipline as a body of knowledge and institution, we will briefly discuss the historical particularities of the development of thought in British sociology.<sup>22</sup>

When we think about an object in its properties, we put them in relation to another one so as to have a frame of reference. Britain’s particularity in relation to French or German sociology was said to have been caused by its late foundation (Anderson, 1981) and its failure to produce a key sociological thinker (Abrams, 1968).<sup>23</sup> Sociology only started to exist as an academic subject at the LSE in 1907 and only began to have a broader academic audience from the 1950s onwards. As Halsey put it, ‘the history of British sociology before the Second World War is in effect an aspect of the history of LSE’ (Halsey, 2004: 14). The belated recognition of

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22 With renowned scholars having provided comprehensive accounts of the history of British sociology (Abrams, 1968; Halsey, 2004; Halsey and Runciman, 2005), within the realms of this thesis we only briefly sketch these developments and do not claim to provide a comprehensive account.

23 According to Goldman, the portrayal of British sociology as ‘the apparent historical failure to establish sociology at the very heart of British academic culture’ (Goldman, 2007: 431) is largely due to the documentary work of these two scholars.

sociology as a subject in its own right by Britain's leading universities – Oxford and Cambridge – is indicative of the status of sociology in this country until the 1950s. Sociology was only introduced into the Cambridge curriculum in 1961 and into the Oxford Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree (PPE) in 1962 (Halsey, 2004).<sup>24</sup>

Levine considers British sociology to go back as far as Hobbes and considers Alfred Marshall and George Herbert Spencer as Britain's foundational sociologists (Levine, 1995). Goldman argues that whilst British sociology may not have produced a Durkheim, Simmel or Weber, it did disseminate its knowledge in a much more dispersed way (Goldman, 2007). Goldman concludes '[...] that the failure to establish a clear-cut discipline called sociology at any time before the mid-twentieth century, if then, may not have been the product of intellectual weakness but of the successful penetration of what C. Wright Mills called 'the sociological imagination' into many areas of British thought and public practice. Wright Mills noticed that although the British had been slow to institutionalize sociology in their universities it was present everywhere in national politics, journalism and the English novel' (Goldman, 2007: 436). Philip Abrams argues that sociology failed to develop in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of the range of opportunities that were available in Britain to move out of the scholarly world into the world of political action (Abrams, 1968). According to Lepenies, literature as a genre was particularly important for the foundation of sociology in the UK (Lepenies, 1988). Some of British sociology's roots can be traced in literature and novelists such as Charles Dickens and Mary Ann Evans, who employed the novel as a tool for social

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<sup>24</sup> For further information on the development of British Sociology in the post-war period and the expansion of British Higher Education see APPENDIX E: The British Higher Education System.

criticism. Another famous example is the work of Matthew Arnold, who was a headmaster in a school in Rugby in the 1830s and connected sociology with literary criticism. However, the demarcation between literature and science as reference points for sociology is not always that clear cut, as the life and work of Beatrice Webb in the late nineteenth and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show. Having had Herbert Spencer as her mentor, Beatrice Webb first embraced a strong belief in sociology as the science of society before pursuing more literary ambitions and taking socialist thinkers such as Lenin as a point of reference. She finally connected literary ways of writing with her major themes of sociological research, the emancipation of women and the advance of state welfare services although her novel ‘Sixty Years On’ in which these two themes were supposed to be connected, remained unfinished (Halsey, 2004: 19).<sup>25</sup> According to Martin Bulmer, ‘The nineteenth-century sources of British sociology in social investigation are surely the most important – the blue books, the investigations of public health, Henry Mayhew, the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, and as we turn into the twentieth century, A. L. Bowley. Many of these figures, however, are also seen as part of the tradition of British social policy, while some British sociologists would not recognise them as their ancestors (Bulmer, 2005: 38). The fact that Hobhouse became Head of Department at the London School of Economics is also indicative of sociology’s commitment to social policy in the early days. Bulmer further points out that the social-policy roots of British sociology and the centrality of Labourism as a reference point can be seen up

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<sup>25</sup> As Halsey further points out, British sociology’s partial roots in literature have only found an appropriate revival in what is now known as Cultural Studies, which started with the foundation of the Center of Cultural Studies in Birmingham around Richard Hoggart, and the work of people such as Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton and Fred Inglis (Halsey, 2004).

to these days in the Labour party's close interaction with sociologists, which culminated in Anthony Giddens' activity as Tony Blair's adviser. In particular, the work of scholars done at Nuffield College in Oxford on equal opportunities, social stratification and social mobility could be seen as particularly concerned with the political agenda of the Labour Party (Bulmer, 2005). Yet, going much further back, the role of Labourism as a major point of reference has its roots in Fabianism and represented a key feature of the early post-war LSE cohort with T.H. Marshall and David Glass as key actors (Halsey, 2004).<sup>26</sup>

What was unique about British sociology in its beginnings was the significance of evolutionary thought. Spencer took from biology not only the notion of evolutionary change, but also the model of the organism. He considered sociology as an ethical foundation at a time when religion was no longer taken as a basis for ethics (Levine, 1995). Philip Abrams emphasised the shaping role of social Darwinists such as Spencer, and later of Galton, in founding the discipline (Abrams, 1968). Likewise, in his genesis of academic sociology in Britain, Halliday discusses the key role of Spencer – the founder of British sociology – and sees sociology as a synthetic discipline that takes biology as a main reference point in how sociology further developed in this country (Halliday, 1968). Whilst Durkheim had formulated an anti-Spencerian sociology in France, Halsey considers Hobhouse as having done something similar in Britain: 'Hobhouse put forward an English type of anti-Spencerian theory linked closely to the doctrine of progress so predominant in his

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<sup>26</sup> Whilst Marshall's attempt as a Labour politician failed, the development of research into social stratification, social policy and citizenship in the UK cannot be thought without his contributions. Furthermore, it was Marshall who launched *The British Journal of Sociology* in 1950 (Halsey, 2004).

lifetime' (Halsey, 2005: 15). However, according to Halsey, '[...] it was social Darwinism that gave rise to the academic separation between sociology and biology. Even today some sociologists repudiate the Darwinian legacy, asserting that sociology begins where biology leaves off, and that social Darwinism and social biology were always contaminated by racism, by Spencerian individualism, and by hereditarian prejudice' (Halsey, 2005: 15). Steve Fuller argues that the Spencerian roots were later disguised by Hobhouse leading the LSE. In this context Fuller recently asked the question of where British sociology would be now if Geddes, a radical evolutionist, had taken over at the LSE: 'My point here is that had Branford's preferred candidate, the botanist Geddes, rather than the philosopher Leonard Hobhouse, been awarded the UK's flagship chair in sociology at the London School of Economics in 1907, an institutionally substantial precedent would have been set for 'sociology' to be the name of a covering science under which the disciplines we now call 'sociology' *and* 'biology' would have been subsumed. The significance of this counterfactual prospect should not be underestimated, especially given Britain's overall geopolitical prominence at the time – albeit second in science to Germany' (Fuller, 2007b: 809).

In trying to understand a story, we need to pay as much attention to the themes that are talked about as well as to those that are discarded. Whilst British sociology cannot be reduced to its Spencerian roots, it is important to pay attention to the selectivity with which sociology and the history of the subject are currently reconstructed. If narratives on sociology – whether in written format such as textbooks or in oral format such as interviews – are taken as an indicator of what

counts as sociology and what is understood as sociology, we cannot completely divide this from the history of sociology in this country. However, looking at current historical accounts of British sociology, such as Halsey's recent publication (Halsey, 2004), the biological inheritance of Spencer *et al.* and how it is presented do not reflect the actual significance of biology for the foundations of sociology in the UK. While Spencer *et al.* are certainly mentioned, their fundamental role in British sociology seems to have been gradually underplayed in current accounts of the historical identity of sociology in this country. As Fuller notes, 'British sociologists have tended to airbrush these earliest indigenous forays out of the discipline's official history' (Fuller, 2007b: 807). This becomes even more evident in current sociology textbooks, in which Spencer, Hobhouse and Ginsberg are hardly ever mentioned, whereas this was more frequently the case fifty years ago, as Platt found out in her study of British Sociological textbooks from 1949 to 2003 (Platt, 2008). It may well be that the fading-out of the evolutionary heritage of the discipline in the UK from people's disciplinary self-understanding may have a role. It could mean that the rather selective representation of British sociology indicates that they would rather not engage with this part of British sociology and prefer to continue the narrative that 'Britain never produced a real social theorist'.

### **3 Researching Sociologists – Epistemological and Methodological Implications**

Researching sociologists requires the analysis of the logical feasibility of studying ourselves. Discussing Bourdieu's and Ashmore's contributions to the paradox of being inside and outside of one's research object at the same time will lead us to look into the relationship between the personal and the scientific accounts of doing research. This will be followed by a brief delineation of my own epistemological underpinnings and an introduction to the means by which *this* sociology of sociology will be carried out. After outlining the scope of my research and the spaces of investigation, I will describe the practicalities of this research journey. I will provide details of how I approached my thirty respondents and how these most valuable encounters unfolded in the field. Finally, I will introduce the reader to the strategies I adopted to make sense of my respondents' narratives.

#### **3.1 *Challenges and Implications of Studying One's Own Profession***

For Bourdieu, the social presents itself under the cloak of the self-evident (Bourdieu, 1992). In Bourdieu's view, studying ourselves is accomplished by objectifying the seemingly familiar: 'The construction of a scientific object requires first and



foremost a break with common sense, that is, with the representations shared by all, whether they be the mere commonplaces of ordinary existence or official representations, often inscribed in institutions and thus present both in the objectivity of social organizations and in the minds of their participants' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 235). Yet, the procedure of 'objectifying the objectifier' indicates the possibility of drawing a clear-cut distinction between subject and object. In contrast to that, Ashmore explains that '[...] in order not to be scientific, one must be outside science; but to study science or anything else from the outside is to be scientific. Therefore, in order to study science unscientifically one must abandon objectivity and study it from inside. But to be inside science means to be scientific' (Ashmore, 1989: 109). Hence, the reflexivity of inquiry into inquiry is not a problem in itself, but a constituent part of any inquiry. Ashmore dedicated himself to this problem by studying reflexive sociologists and their approaches towards a sociology of sociology (Ashmore, 1989). With his own analysis being located on a meta-meta level of reflexivity, the question of the epistemological and ontological status of these theoretical objects arises.

Ashmore found the answer to this question in Alec McHoul's work (McHoul, 1982). For McHoul anything – regardless of its materiality – can be the subject of an ethno-methodological inquiry: '[...] any set of practices can be topicalised, including the professional and the scientific, ethno-methodology can understand itself as 'descriptor-in-meta-discourses' (semiotics, psychoanalysis, generative grammar [and SSK]'' (McHoul, 1982; cited in Ashmore, 1989). McHoul further argues that it is by means of ethno-methodology that we can understand how the reality of the

participants is constructed (McHoul, 1982). Yet, for Ashmore, the simultaneous assumption of the existence of objectivity and its deconstruction would lead the ethno-methodological endeavour *ad absurdum*, since showing ‘how objectivities *become* objectivities is to show that they are *not* objectivities’ (Ashmore, 1989: 99).

Whilst Bourdieu does not tire of mastering the analyst/participant dialectic, his introduction of the notion of participant objectivation could be considered an attempt to soften his idea of a clear-cut subject-object relationship: ‘Participant objectivation, arguably the highest form of the sociological art, is realizable only to the extent that it is predicated on as complete as possible an objectivation of the interest to objectivize inscribed in the fact of participating, as well as on a bracketing of this interest and of the representations it sustains’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 260). And yet, Bourdieu seems to go back and forth with his argumentation. Whilst he concedes that there are limits to objectifying ourselves, he nevertheless suggests that we have to get beyond ourselves: ‘Awareness of the limits of objectivist objectivation made me discover that there exists, within the social world, and particularly within the academic world, a whole nexus of institutions whose effect is to render acceptable the gap between the objective truth of the world and the lived truth of what we are and what we do in it – everything that objectivized subjects bring up when they oppose objectivist analysis with the idea that ‘things are not that way’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 255).

### **3.2    *Beyond the Subject/Object Relationship***

Having acknowledged the analyst/participant dialectic, the challenge of carrying out research into the self-understanding of sociologists in England still remains. In the following, we will discuss accounts of feminist sociologists for whom introspection into one's own intellectual biography is a fruitful resource for constructively dealing with the subject-object relationship and subsequently leaving this dichotomy behind altogether. As a consequence, the subject-object dichotomy is left behind altogether. The baseline of feminists' critique towards empiricist and male perspectives is the understanding that by attempting to draw a clear-cut line between subject and object of inquiry, women would again be objectified on the level of research (Stanley, 1990). With the self affecting every aspect of research – from the choice of project to the presentation of findings – Stanley and Wise consider the integration of autobiography into research a way of implementing the link between the social and the individual in the research process (Stanley and Wise, 1993). In a similar vein, Letherby is convinced that '[...] a critical and reflexive form of autobiography has the sociological potential for considering the extent to which our subjectivity is not something that gets in the way of our social analysis but is itself social [...]' (Letherby, 2000: 92). Feminist sociologists, and sociologists such as Gouldner and Mills, find themselves on common ground, as they argue against the possibility of the value-free researcher. In order to enhance an understanding of the relationship between the researcher and her work, feminist sociologists, Gouldner and Mills all suggested emphasising this interaction rather than denying its existence, thereby leaving a strict dichotomy between subject and object behind.

### **3.3 Notes on my Sociological Becoming**

Developing a discourse on the subject/object relationship in outlining a study on one's own profession would lead itself *ad absurdum*, if we fail to pay attention to the actual realities of this research and the researcher involved in it. In the following, I will therefore provide a few notes on my sociological becoming and how it impacted this research. The personal dimension of one's research may be easier to spot in cases where an intimate connection between the researcher and her topic is evident, such as in the case of child loss and respective research (Letherby, 2000). However, since my research does not take its origin from a seemingly personal event in my life, but from periods of university education and work experience, the autobiographical motivation in taking it as a subject of inquiry may be less obvious. Yet, as the discipline has accompanied me since my teenage years and opened up a world of ideas that has kept me enthused ever since, the choice of this topic is both personal and professional in nature.

The questions that I kept asking my respondents, I now have to answer myself: 'Do you see yourself as a sociologist, and what made you become one?' Doing this exercise, I am also mindful of the challenge my respondents had to tackle by having to answer such questions. There is something strange about reconstructing the processes of one's own sociological becoming. For one, it is only retrospectively that we construct meaning and are able to see links between phenomena that previously seemed unconnected. Secondly, as we know well from the many pitfalls of autobiographical writing, there is a risk of romanticising the past and making events fit in such a way as to achieve an exciting story line. So, we have to ask

whether it was reading Simone de Beauvoir and the Communist Manifesto and those childhood memories of social injustice in school towards a befriended working-class child that evoked what one now identifies as sociological imagination and that finally made one study sociology. All of that is true and at the same time it is not, as I cannot ascribe the beginning of my journey to sociology, and inferentially with sociology to a single event. Rather, thinking more carefully, there is a complex entanglement of factors that seems to have made sociology particularly appealing to me. Whilst I have always had a strong interest in politics and issues of social justice and social change, I did not grow up in surroundings where politics was particularly important or critical discussion was encouraged. My ancestors from both sides had been farmers and landowners for generations. Class struggle was not the sort of thing to engage with. Even though the farming tradition was not carried forward in my parents' generation – with my father being an office employee and my mother doing domestic labour and taking care of my three sisters and myself – the heritage of values that are traditionally related to farming were nevertheless present and had hardly been fractured. Having grown up in a village in the Austrian Alps, I would describe my family background as conservative and Roman Catholic. Yet there was openness for education and the freedom to pursue any kind of subject. From early childhood onwards I have had an enthusiasm for imagined worlds and writing. Education and novels opened up horizons for me that I saw could potentially be continued in sociology. Though there may have been other paths to be taken, it was finally sociology.

I matriculated at the University of Vienna and read sociology and law. After one year I dropped the law component, which I had mostly chosen as a back-up, and consequently encountered the common stereotypes about sociologists ending up as taxi drivers. Sociology offered a rich and diversified body of knowledge and I wanted to devote all my time to it. After the first half of my studies I became very interested in Science and Technology Studies but also in the sociology of work. Sociology changed my life and quickly became an inseparable part of me, providing me with tools to think and a voice to speak. One of my respondents reminded me of myself when he described his encounter with sociology and compared it to his classmates’.

‘When I was a student, there was always the division in sociology between those who were committed to it and those for whom it was just a degree. One of my fellow students said sociology is all right as long as it does not affect your private life, which is the complete opposite to what happened to me. I got very interested. You also apply that to the dynamics of relationships. So I think it is a total thing. There are lots of different sides. But we can’t separate sociology from our lives.’ (*Martin, 60, lecturer, 60s and old university*)

Yet, it may well be that my enthusiasm for the discipline, its analytical force in theory and practice and its political promise made me more susceptible to disappointment with what I finally found out to be an unfulfilled or compromised disciplinary promise. Taking the regrettable absence of Austrian sociologists from public discourse as an example (Fleck, 2002), I realised that this promise of sociology did not seem to become fulfilled to the extent to which I would have expected it to be. Furthermore, I did not see the element of critique that sociologists often state to be missing in society, reflected in how sociologists conceptualised

their own activity in academia, not recognising the work character of their sociological activity. Finally, the frictions that I had been exposed to on the free research market in Austria, put against academics' lack of protest, resulted in making the academic labour process amongst social researchers the topic of my MA thesis in Warwick. Later, this theme was reinforced by the lecturers' strike in the UK in 2006 and its non-reception by sociologists. The two research strands I had spent most of my time on – sociology of work and sociology of knowledge – finally provided me with the tools to look at my own discipline and its inhabitants. All in all, it seemed that carrying out my doctoral research on the self-understanding of sociologists was a way of constructively dealing with my disappointment with sociologists and the way I had experienced the sociological calling being undermined.

And yet, there is also another dimension to my choice of research. My indebtedness to critique as a core principle of sociological work cannot be separated from my having been socialised into a particular historical and socio-political setting. Based on an empirical analysis of Plato and his environment, Gouldner writes in 'Enter Plato' that '[a]ll social theories [...] embody the traces of social diagnosis and social therapy. They are never simply disinterested efforts to describe and explain social reality. One way in which social theories can be understood, then, is as analysis, clear or cryptic, of the cause and possible cures of the ills of the society to which the theorist has been subjected' (Gouldner, 1967: 171). Though I cannot label myself a social theorist, Gouldner's message about the impact of one's surroundings on the development of one's intellectual world is equally relevant to me. Without wishing

to be too deterministic, I do think that the history of my country has had an impact on my thought and partly explains my intellectual vicinity to thinkers who emphasise a continuous alertness as a desired state of being for all intellectuals (Mannheim, 1985). Having grown up in a former Nationalsocialist country in which my upbringing was marked by the narrative of ‘Nie wieder’ – ‘Never again’ – my turn to working on a sociology of sociology cannot be understood without mentioning Austria’s past.

Simmel beautifully wrote about the phenomenon of the stranger. Changing places and being confronted with new environments, the stranger starts to see the previously familiar in a new light (Simmel, 1992). In a similar way, this was evoked with my coming to England. It was only then that I could make complete sense of history and its bearings on me, both as an Austrian citizen and a sociologist.<sup>27</sup> Apart from the pleasures of having been taught by emeritus professor Paul Neurath during one of his visits to Vienna, the place where I had got in touch with sociology was only rarely confronted with its past.<sup>28</sup> For me – and this is much more of an outing than anything else – realising that I come from a country that lost its intellectual world almost entirely in WWII, still weighs heavily on my shoulders and fills me with sadness.<sup>29</sup> My motivation to be critical as a sociologist, to engage with current issues out in the world, to shed light on social problems and to contribute to their

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27 The loss of generations of sociologists and like-minded people who either had to migrate or died in the Holocaust and the effect on the intellectual landscape in Austria after WWII is well documented in Christian Fleck’s work (Fleck, 2003; Fleck, 2007a; Fleck, 2007b).

28 See Paul Neurath’s sociology PhD thesis on his insight experience in Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps that was only edited and published after his death (Fleck and Stehr, 2004).

29 See Fleck’s analysis of the forced migration of German and Austrian social scientists and the impact this had on the US Higher Education system (Fleck, 2007a).



analysis may have many reasons. Yet, one of the strongest forces in my constant emphasis on critique in social theory and practice is the history of my country. My modest contribution with this thesis is to remind ourselves of this task that I consider as sociology's biggest. It is at this point that my research into the self-understanding of sociologists is most personally and theoretically motivated at the same time.

### **3.4     *Putting Gouldner into Practice***

It is this understanding of sociology as an interaction between the structural, the social, the personal and the historical that further shapes my methodological approach. Most importantly, trying to capture the tensions between the claims sociologists make about themselves and their sociological practice, this thesis aims to go beyond a mere illustration of sociologists' intersecting biographies and research agendas. Rather, leading sociologists' narratives about their practices back to their initial disciplinary aspirations, I want to make sociologists accountable both to their own claims as well as to what they consider to be the calling of the discipline. Against this background, qualitative interviews seemed to be the ideal methods of research. As I will elaborate in more detail in 'Spaces of Investigation' and 'Selecting my Informants', the research was conducted in thirty qualitative interviews with sociologists in ten Sociology Departments in England following a matrix of age, gender, position, research interest and type of university.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For more detailed information concerning the selection procedure of my informants, see 'Appendix C: Matrix of Interviewees'.

Having had Gouldner accompany our investigations, his sociology of knowledge is directly translated into my research methodology. The construction of a semi-structured interview schedule was informed by the key ideas that we discussed in the theoretical analysis. The semi-structured interview schedule<sup>31</sup> captures the three dimensions of sociological life that are omnipresent in Gouldner's theory: sociologists' ways of becoming and their aspirations, sociologists' practices and their compromised claims. Not only did this procedure enable me to capture sociologists' claims about the discipline, but it also allowed me to put these claims in context with my respondents' realities. Hence, with the connection of theory and practice reflecting my indebtedness to Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology, my methodological approach is a translation of his sociology of knowledge on an empirical level.

### **3.5    *Spaces of Investigation***

For Gouldner, material, social and political conditions need to be taken into account in order to understand the social theory that is produced and the social theorists that arise out of these contexts (Gouldner, 1970). In doing a study on sociologists and their self-understanding, we therefore need to think about the places where sociological thought and identity are most shaped and altered. With Sociology Departments constituting the core sites for the reproduction of the discipline through teaching and research, I decided to select my informants from a Sociology

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<sup>31</sup> For more detailed information, see 'Appendix B: Interview Schedule'.

Department or a similarly-labelled unit (Jary and Lebeau, 2006; Procter, 2007).<sup>32</sup> Departments lend visibility to the developments within the discipline.<sup>33</sup> What happens in a Sociology Department either already *is* sociology – for its theory and methodology being acknowledged as such – or it *becomes* sociology for its being thought and taught under the roof of a Sociology Department. This can be seen with the gradual transformation of sociology by feminist sociology and gender studies (Delamont, 2003; Pullen, 1999). My argument is that research, teaching and publications as the visible output of academic staff within Sociology Departments do not allow for an exclusive focus on self-identified sociologists. Rather, a study on sociologists needs to reach as widely as possible, if it does not want to reproduce predictable narratives on what sociology is and who sociologists are. Thus, I deliberately wanted to interview people who were not entirely convinced they are sociologists as well as people who clearly saw themselves as sociologists.<sup>34</sup>

Initially, I had planned to study sociologists' self-understanding in England, Scotland and Wales. However, within the scope of this study, extending my research

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32 My decision to select respondents within Sociology Departments did not have the purpose of emphasising the departments as core units of analysis. For an example of a case study of Sociology Departments see Lucas (Lucas, 2006). Rather, this piece of research is a study of sociologists that takes into account the department and the university as critical features of sociological life and work.

33 Whilst this study focuses on sociologists in Sociology Departments in England, this must not be mistaken for sociology being produced within Sociology Departments only. Rather, sociology has also been an exporting discipline to related fields. Examples for specialisms within sociology that expanded to other departments are sociology of work, sociology of medicine or sociology of education. However, as during the Thatcher era in the 1980s both sociology itself and some of its sub-specialisms came under pressure, in some of these areas the pattern of available career opportunities did encourage a migration away from sociology, in particular to business studies and to some extent medicine. In this respect, the declining presence of sociology of work and sociology of education in Sociology Departments can also be attributed to the political climate of the Thatcher era and the general hostility to sociology, in particular those subspecialisms, which were viewed as at least a potential political threat (Halsey, 2004).

34 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview' summarises my respondents' self-understanding as sociologists and/or others and provides an overview for each of my thirty respondents.

to Wales and Scotland was not feasible, especially in view of the different HE regulations in Scotland. I therefore decided to put the emphasis of my research on sociologists who work in Sociology Departments in England. I selected informants from different types of universities, distinguishing between old established universities, red-brick universities, campus universities that were founded in the 1960s, former polytechnics (post-1992 institutions) and finally new universities whose foundation goes back to the last five to ten years. Whilst sociology is a comparatively young discipline in the UK compared to France and Germany (Halsey, 2004; Lepenies, 1988), it is worth mentioning that the tradition and age of a university are not necessarily an indication of the discipline's reputation within it. This can be seen with Oxford and Cambridge, where a marked skepticism towards the status of sociology as a discipline in its own right resulted in the subject's not being taught there until the 1960s. Sociology was only introduced into the Cambridge curriculum in 1961 and into Oxford University's Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree (PPE) in 1962 (Halsey, 2004). We would miss out another important piece in the construction of what the discourse of sociology *is* and *how* it is shaped, if we did not take into account the inter-dependence between intellectual and economic mechanisms. In fact, as I would further like to argue, what counts as sociology and who counts as contributing to sociology in the UK, is partly shaped by the seven-yearly research assessment exercise (RAE). The RAE results, as well as the procedure of the RAE itself, have implications for departments and sociologists on all levels, both economically and intellectually (Henkel, 2000). In a study on the RAE and its impact on economics and business studies, Harley and Lee found out that the range of journals that are RAE-recognised emphasises the mainstreaming of

ideas and would make it more difficult to deviate from common knowledge (Harley and Lee, 1997). Whilst critics argue that similar effects of mainstreaming that encourage the redundant employment of old ideas rather than exploring new territories are in play with the RAE for Sociology (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003; Rappert, 1999), it is worth noting that Sociology panels have generally been a lot less prescriptive about defining key journals than many other panels, and have also recognised monographs and book chapters. Hence, rather than my respondents' self-identification as sociologists rendering them sociologists, what does make them key figures within a sociological discourse is their belonging to a Sociology Department and their subsequent contribution to journals that count for the Sociology RAE.

### **3.6 *Selecting my Informants***

Following this outline of the sociological discipline and its inhabitants, in which they are framed as a diverse and dynamic body, the procedure of selecting my informants could be characterised as inclusive on several levels. I approached academics in Sociology Departments irrespective of whether they labelled themselves as sociologists. I further selected them according to a matrix of gender, ethnicity, position, age, type of university and research interests. Overall, I carried out thirty interviews with sociologists in ten different departments in England, covering different types of university. Whilst the distribution of gender, age, position, ethnicity and research interests is balanced among my interviewees, the

practicalities of the research did not allow this matrix to be followed precisely within each department. Furthermore, processes of increasing globalisation of knowledge production and scientific communities argued against an emphasis on nationality as a selection criterion. Rather, the emphasis of this research is on sociologists *in* the UK, and specifically in England. Likewise, I did not want to distinguish between respondents who had carried out all their training in the UK and others who had come here, having done their first degrees elsewhere. My own status as a foreigner may have further sensitised me towards a more open interpretation of who is labelled as a sociologist in the UK. In contrast to that, position within academia constituted a strong selection criterion. How respondents relate to sociology seems to be significantly affected by their position within the socioeconomic university hierarchy. I therefore tried to interview one person from each hierarchical rank in each department – lecturer, senior lecturer, research fellow, reader, professor.<sup>35</sup> Age and particularly birth cohort were additional important factors to consider. In the light of the HE education landscape having fundamentally changed within the last thirty years, it could be assumed that sociologists' elaborations on the discipline and their relationship with their work would differ substantially. To give an example, sociologists who were socialised into sociology in the late 1940s and 1950s, but particularly those trained in the 1960s did benefit in their career histories from the expansion of sociology in the HE sector (Halsey, 2004). Their narratives may therefore reveal quite different features in comparison to younger scholars who have

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35 Whilst the number of contract researchers and sessional teachers is rising, this group is not accordingly reflected in the group of my informants. Initially, I aimed for a stronger consideration of this vulnerable group in my sample so as to reflect the current state of sociology in an appropriate way. Yet, while I do have a few lecturers on a non-permanent contract in my sample, this is not the case for researchers or teachers who are employed on a very short-term basis. This was also partly due to their lack of visibility on departmental webpages, which made it more difficult for me to track them within this research.

never experienced anything other than a highly competitive and performance-oriented academic environment.

In addition to type of university, position and age, gender was another significant selection criterion. I interviewed fifteen female and fifteen male sociologists, ensuring I interviewed males and females from every position within academia. Whilst the majority of sociology undergraduate students is now female (Halsey, 2004), the academic ranks still reflect a male dominance, particularly in higher positions. In a study of women's and men's careers in British sociology, Jennifer Platt found that out of the cohorts that were appointed in the 1960s, 79% of the men had been promoted by 2000, as opposed to only 60% of the women. This relationship did not change substantially with the cohort of 1970s appointments, with 69% of the men and 58% of the women having experienced promotion by 2000 (Platt, 2004). This situation of women still being disadvantaged also finds its continuation on an intellectual level. Whilst gender as an analytical category has transformed sociology, it is still confined to play a ghettoised status compared to the high status of 'social theory' (Delamont, 2003; Gerhard, 2004). Ethnicity and race feature even more prominently as factors for marginalisation and exclusion. This can be seen in the comparatively small number of non-white British students and staff (Murji, 2007), as well as in the kind of knowledge that is recognised as high-status knowledge. Race and ethnicity not only inform sociologists' work, they also shape how they experience academia and sociology (see Hill Collins, 1986; Hill Collins, 2005; Jones, 2006; Murji, 2007). Whilst I did not select my respondents on the basis of census ethnicity categories, I deliberately approached a number of sociologists of

non-white origin, in order to reflect the diversity of sociologists in the UK and to make potentially misrepresented or under-represented voices heard in a body of knowledge and discipline within which white, male and Eurocentric standpoints are still the predominant way of viewing the world (Hill Collins, 2000).

Based on my selection criteria, I then browsed through departmental web pages. I was interested in gaining a good balance between respondents who carry out more applied social research and those whose work is more theory-based. Yet, as we will see later, the boundaries between these areas are more fluid than stated on the web pages. Being interested in the mass of sociologists rather than in outliers, I further decided not to interview outstanding celebrities whose careers had taken an extraordinary turn, such as Anthony Giddens. With their biographies speaking for themselves, assuring anonymity would have been more difficult. After having selected potential informants, I contacted fortyfive academics by email in December 2006.<sup>36</sup> In the following months I sent reminders with more detailed information about my research. I finally carried out thirty qualitative interviews over a period of six months. The majority of these interviews were conducted between January and March 2007. Apart from two phone interviews, all interviews were carried out face to face.

The information I provided in the email included a description of my project and an outline of the measures I adopted to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. In accordance with common ethics regulations I had assured confidentiality and

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<sup>36</sup> See 'APPENDIX A: Approaching Informants'.



anonymity (British Sociological Association, 2002). In addition to anonymising the data, I tried to make my respondents' narratives less identifiable by not providing too many clues about their actual research. Younger and less established scholars, as well as scholars who worked on highly contentious and sensitive topics such as terrorism or religion, were particularly concerned about their anonymity.

In the light of academics' considerable and notorious workload, the willingness of the majority of my respondents to be interviewed was surprising. Only one sociologist declined to be interviewed on the grounds of time constraints. Some informants were determined enough to correspond with me for two or three months before we finally found an appropriate time slot. Others even offered me to contact them again after their study leave in case I still needed more informants. However, approaching respondents was easier in some institutions than others, although no overall pattern upon this distinction could finally be revealed. It seemed to me that some respondents' reluctance to be interviewed was an indication of the general departmental atmosphere and the working conditions therein. This first impression of different departmental cultures was further reinforced when I finally went to these departments to meet my informants.

I soon realised that the email correspondence in itself was a rich documentation of the relationships between my informants and myself. Some people wanted to have more detailed information on why I had selected them, the theoretical background of the study and how I would ensure anonymity and confidentiality. With some respondents there were hints of a small discourse on methodological issues. The

most remarkable case was that of one respondent who asked me to have a look at the interview schedule beforehand and then sparked a discussion on how this might have an impact on the interview situation. Others shared their skepticism about sociology with me and admitted to finding themselves in a crisis with sociology, or not seeing themselves as pure sociologists. In cases where their doubts were not that strong, I clarified that by interviewing academics whose understanding of sociology challenges the discipline I wished to question a narrow disciplinary understanding of sociology. Whenever sociologists replied to my emails negatively, they always gave a detailed account of why they thought of themselves as not being the right person for my interviews.

### **3.7 *In Between Trains and Departments***

When I think of my fieldwork, I cannot think of my interviews, these sixty or ninety minutes of shared time, as the only part of this experience. There was also a before and after and a physical dimension to it. Going to the place, experiencing the university space and environment was in itself a way of placing my respondents on a sociological map. It wasn't only my respondents who told a story; rather, their stories were part of a bigger story that I learned to perceive as I entered the university, walked along the corridors and saw old and rusty or new and flashy departmental signs. Without being deterministic, there are ways in which a department's performance on the UK sociology map is partly reflected by the archeology of the university site. There are stories of money and prestige that find

their expression in well-sized offices and there are other stories of shoeboxes that are called offices. Even the standard of the university toilet tells us something – the higher the number of overseas students paying tuition fees, the nicer the toilets, was my conclusion. In the staircases and outside the buildings I saw the student populations that these sociologists may teach. They varied in social class, cultural and economic background and ethnicity across the different places that I visited. I tried to get a general sense of where I was. X seems to be a cool place, I noted, but Y must be hell, off the record of course. In my mind I made notes of the places I would love to work in myself and the ones I would dread, if I ever had the choice.

On my research trips, I documented everything that attracted my attention and that I saw and heard. I did this by taking notes and voice-recording my respondents' narratives. Additionally, I took pictures of university buildings, little scenes at the universities, pictures of my trips.<sup>37</sup> This more comprehensive way of collecting not only the narratives of my respondents but also their surroundings, sharpened my sense for the stories that happened in between the lines of my interviews. After all, my respondents' narratives were set in particular spatial, economic, cultural and social contexts. The before and after even included the numerous train journeys on perpetually late-running trains and the waiting time in the most desolate coffee shops in train stations. It was then that I transferred my voice recordings straight to my laptop and data stick, wrote up all associations emerging from the interview in my fieldwork diary and tried to produce a preliminary summary of each interview.

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<sup>37</sup> Within this research, the collection of visual material was something that developed as an additional mode of taking field notes and sensitised my understanding for the field on several dimensions. At the time of carrying out the research I did not feel confident enough to explore the visual route in more detail, which is why the material itself is not included in the thesis. Yet, in future research, I would like to pay more attention to the visual in expressing and understanding the sociological.

### **3.8 Sociologists Talking<sup>38</sup>**

Thirty sociologists were talking, telling me their stories. The interviews varied in length from about 45 minutes to up to two hours. Some respondents were more articulate than others. One could tell from their narratives and how they presented their reflections whether they had thought about questions in relation to their lives as sociologists before. One of the biggest surprises was that in contrast to what I had expected, most respondents did not end up in a meta-discourse on sociology. Rather, they provided a very personal approach to sociology and their role as sociologists. This started with their telling me how they came to the subject. The personal dimension became even more evident when I asked them what led them to work in their particular research area and whether they saw themselves as sociologists outside the university.

In the following I would like to describe what happened during the interview, or to be precise, during the interview and shortly before and after, including the little conversations. They said that they don't mind my recording the interview; they asked whether I had double-checked that the voice recorder was working, on this occasion recounting a little anecdote about their own empirical research. They asked whether I would like to have a drink and which chair I would like to sit on. I could

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<sup>38</sup> The title of this chapter is a reference to an exhibition the author jointly organised with Cath Lambert based on the author's research on sociologists' relationship with teaching and research in a project related to this doctoral research in Warwick University in March and April 2008 within the annual proceedings of the BSA conference 2008. Links to the exhibition will be available in due course at [www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention). Furthermore, in an article entitled 'Sociologists Talking' Les Back took this exhibition as the point of departure for a discussion of current constraints in Higher Education and their effects on sociologists (Back, 2008).

sit on this chair, one of my respondents told me whilst pointing to the chair and explaining that we would then sit on equal levels. It was evident that we had a lot in common. Indeed, it was sociologists talking, them telling me a story and me on the other hand asking and listening. This was when it was crystal-clear that my counterpart was a sociologist like myself, well aware of the interview situation and all of its implications (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

Having said that, this apparent reflexivity with regard to the whole situation was hardly ever present throughout the whole interview. As much as they were wary of my being the interviewer and their being the interviewee, as the interview carried on, this hyper-reflexive dynamic was no longer omnipresent. During the interview, I mostly perceived my respondents as being thoroughly occupied with articulating their thoughts. Occasionally, I asked respondents after the interview how they had experienced it. Many of them told me that the interview had given them the chance to think about themselves as sociologists in a more systematic manner for the very first time. They enjoyed being interviewed and I could also see that some of them clearly benefited from the reflections that evolved throughout the interview. One respondent even took notes of her own ideas while we were talking. In this respect the interview was a more mutual relationship and, I would assume, an equally rewarding experience for my respondents.

As sociologists we are socialised in an environment where the ability of critiquing other people's arguments, in particular our colleagues', is trained and emphasised. Yet, as the interaction with sociologists is characterised by the format of discussion,

the interview situation with sociologists was an almost unnatural setting to be in. For me, maintaining a relaxed but stoic interviewer position when my interviewees uttered standpoints that were in contrast to mine, was one of the biggest challenges. The moments of real challenge were yet to come. Thereafter, in the analysis, the distinction between the two categories of listening and critiquing no longer existed.

### **3.9     *Making Sense of Sociologists' Narratives***

As for the question of what kind of method we employed in analysing our narratives, the answer is easy. The richness of Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology lends itself to a way of thinking by means of which the empirical material can be made sense of. Two features of Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology are particularly crucial interpretive tools: first of all, Gouldner's framing of sociology as an activity that can only be understood if we see history, social theory, the sociologist and sociological practice in relation to each other, involved to interweave my respondents' views with a structural level of understanding, shedding more light on relevant issues of politics and history. This also implied that I put my respondents' views in relation to other bodies of literature that touched upon the numerous themes that came up in the interviews – sociological becoming, sociological activity, sociological aspirations, key features of sociology, history of sociology, social theory and sociological practice in current Higher Education. By setting my respondents' narratives in context with sometimes seemingly adjacent literature, I also challenged their arguments.

The second feature that I extracted from Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology as a methods tool is open-mindedness to hostile bodies of knowledge. As Gouldner himself did not have anything to say about 'research methods', the methodology-oriented reader may wish to gain some more specific information as to how this approach could be phrased within the genre of research methodology literature. What comes closest to what I have just outlined is Alvesson's and Skoeldberg's 'Reflexive Methodology' (Alvesson and Skoeldberg, 2000). They argue that the often technical and numb use of qualitative methods indicates that qualitative work becomes a process that is disentangled from the theories previously used. The focus on 'data collection and processing' in most qualitative methodological theories would be unreflective. Instead, they suggest that a fundamentally hermeneutic element should permeate the research process at all stages. Hence, interpretation rather than the representation of reality on the basis of collected data should become the central element (Alvesson and Skoeldberg, 2000). According to them, the researcher needed to employ all available theoretical and empirical resources without categorically ruling out any of them as being potentially relevant for gaining a better understanding of the data.

Alvesson and Skoeldberg particularly emphasise the significance of the political, economical, historical, social and personal spheres that form a comprehensive basis against which empirical data can be understood. The authors further suggest counterposing a structural level of analysis to a more individualised one. It is this reflexive mediation between the different spheres of analysis that could be seen as

reflecting Gouldner's understanding of the intertwining of different levels of analysis and the necessity of seeing them in context, though the authors never explicitly mention Gouldner. Finally, Alvesson and Skoeldberg emphasise the importance of recognising the researcher's positioning within the research process: 'Even more strongly: there is no such thing as unmediated data or facts; these are always the results of interpretation. Yet the interpretation does not take place in a neutral, apolitical, ideology-free space. Nor is an autonomous, value-free researcher responsible for it' (Alvesson and Skoeldberg, 2000: 9). This is particularly relevant with regard to my being a sociologist: as I outlined in 'Notes on my Sociological Becoming,' I have intellectual affinity with thinkers who see critique as a core principle of sociological work and relate theory and practice to each other. Subsequently, this is also reflected in how I interpreted my respondents' narratives.

Gouldner's principles of thought are the structuring foundations for the analysis of my empirical data. In 'Part I: The Calling of Sociology – Sociologists' Claims and Aspirations', we aim to highlight sociologists' understanding of the discipline and their disciplinary aspirations. PART II: SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE – REALITIES AND TENSIONS, OR 'HOW TO SWITCH OFF ONE'S SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN THE UNIVERSITY. A COURSE IN FOUR LECTURES' will be an illustration of sociologists practising their discipline. This will involve looking at the dimensions of sociological practice as well as the ways in which sociologists' disciplinary aspirations are potentially compromised. Finally, PART III: Living Sociology' aims to discuss two themes. In the light of sociologists' partly tense realities, their claims for pursuing the discipline will be



revisited. At the heart of 'PART III: Living Sociology' is a discussion of how my respondents consider sociology to be carried out against the background of current constraints and inherent contradictions that were discussed in 'Part II: Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions'.

## **PART I: THE CALLING OF SOCIOLOGY – SOCIOLOGISTS' CLAIMS AND ASPIRATIONS**

According to Gouldner, it is only by putting sociologists' aspirations in relation to their practices that we can find out to what extent sociologists' disciplinary claims are compromised. 'The Calling of Sociology – Sociologists' Claims and Aspirations' constitutes the first part of this three-pronged analysis of the self-understanding of sociologists in England. It aims to accomplish three things. First of all, it introduces the reader to my respondents, their relationships with sociology and their various paths into sociology. Secondly, it intends to identify their views of what sociology is. Thirdly, in relation to that, it seeks to explore their disciplinary aspirations.

The reasons for analysing my respondents' aspirations and their views of the discipline in conjunction with each other go back to Gouldner's *Reflexive Sociology*, which informs this study. According to Gouldner, sociologists' aspirations and their framing of the discipline are inextricably linked with each other (Gouldner, 1965; Gouldner, 1970). My respondents' views on sociology and hence their aspirations are not only attributable to the particular historical and sociopolitical context they found themselves in at the time of their intellectual socialisation. Key social theory books and sociology textbooks at the time of their studies may also have had an impact on how they perceive the discipline (Platt,

2008). The relationship between biography and history in the shaping of our understanding of sociology was most eloquently illustrated by C. Wright Mills: 'The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst' (Mills, 2000: 6). In this spirit, 'PART I: THE CALLING OF SOCIOLOGY – SOCIOLOGISTS' CLAIMS AND ASPIRATIONS' will be devoted to an analysis of the processes of sociological becoming a sociologist, taking into account biographical, socioeconomic and historical features, as well as to an analysis of how these processes of socialisation shape my respondents' attitudes towards the discipline and their aspirations as sociologists.

## **4 Variations on a Theme: Relationships to Sociology**

Aiming to understand the current field of sociology in the UK and what occupies the people *within* it, we need to shed light on *who* they are, *what* made them enter sociology and *how* they entered it. As discussed in more detail in 'Spaces of Investigation', we would not be able to do justice to an understanding of the production of current sociological discourse and its inhabitants, if we only focused on those actors who explicitly understand themselves as sociologists. Underlying this more open definition of a sociologist is the idea that knowledge exchange

between academic staff with a strong sociological outlook with those who see themselves as being more detached from the field, may leave traces on the discipline. This more permeable understanding of who is in and out of the discipline is reminiscent of the idea of synthesis that was omnipresent in sociology's founding days, going back to Auguste Comte.<sup>39</sup> Emphasising the dynamic character of sociology, I therefore interviewed academics in Sociology Departments irrespective of their primary identification as sociologists. Their being *in* sociology, and their affiliation to sociology in an institutional sense, rendered them sociologists and hence eligible for this study.

My introductory question as to whether they *are* sociologists triggered more general reflections on the nature of this label and its implications. My interviewees' responses touched upon their relationship to sociology as a body of knowledge as well as to sociology as an institution and the people within it. In addition, they related the nature of their investment to sociology to other areas of their lives. The intertwining of all these themes is further reflected in how I write about them. The mere attempt of categorising my respondents' self-understanding may suggest the possibility of exclusively subsuming certain individuals within one group over and above another one. Yet, their relationships with sociology are hardly ever mutually exclusive and not always located on the same analytical level.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the nature of my respondents' elaborations on this fundamental question of whether they

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39 Whilst the idea of synthesis in sociology goes back to Comte, in my empirical data this key idea emerges in several different variants as we will see in more detail in 'Synthesis', where we will discuss my respondents' conceptualisations of synthesis.

40 The impression of a subject-oriented allocation to certain themes may nevertheless arise in reading the following sections. To take an example, whilst one respondent is featured in 'Sociology as a Marginalising Force – Outsiders within Sociology' her approach to sociology may equally be vocational.

finally *are* sociologists may allow for more general observations concerning sociological conduct and speech (Bourdieu, 1993). Their observations about themselves were never entirely univocal. Patterns of making an argument and at the same time questioning it were omnipresent in almost all narratives. *How* sociologists present themselves may provide us with essential clues about sociological thought and sociology as a field. My respondents' partly tentative and questioning nature in presenting themselves will be reflected in how I introduce them here. Nothing is ever simple; every heading is followed by a subheading and a contradiction.

#### **4.1     *Sociology as a Life-Encompassing Endeavour***

Without any hesitation, a lot of my respondents declared that they see themselves as sociologists. For many of them, the label of a sociologist would be an accurate description of their *entire* selves.<sup>41</sup> As one respondent put it, once you have found sociology, you can never switch it off. This metaphor alludes to a framing of sociology, the pursuit of which exceeds scales of time, space and investment that are commonly allocated to a job. However, the conceptualisation of sociology as a life-encompassing endeavour and *what* this exactly entailed, varied. The main demarcation point in my respondents' conceptualisation of sociology as a life-encompassing pursuit was located between those whose *perception* of the world is *informed* by sociology and those who are not only affected by sociology in their thoughts but also in their *activities*. Three names that come to mind with regard to

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<sup>41</sup> See 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview' for more detailed information for all of my informants.

these types need mentioning here: Max Weber on the one hand and Alvin Gouldner and C. Wright Mills on the other. First of all, we shall however listen to what my respondents have to say.

In describing their relationship with sociology, some of them explicitly employed the notion of sociology as a vocation. Carl, a senior lecturer from a red brick university who studied in the 1960s, describes himself as a vocational sociologist. His dedication to the subject derives from his seeing sociology as a vocation. In that he would be informed by the theorists he holds in high esteem, such as Norbert Elias and Max Weber.

‘I have never been anything else. What else could I be? I am a vocational sociologist. For me it is not just a job. It is a way of life. There is a commitment. And that came from Elias. A complete dedication of your life to the subject. And I can’t imagine it in any other way. Sociology as a way of vocation. For me it does impinge on how I live my life and how I relate to people. I could never be with clear conviction a conservative, socialist or a liberal. I could not be any one of those. I would not be able to do that. In many ways I take a stand on not taking a stand. That comes straight out of my sociology. I find it impossible to argue in any kind of dogmatic way. That does affect my everyday life.’ (*Carl, 64, senior lecturer, red brick university*)

What is clear in Carl’s statement is the understanding that scientific pursuit requires utmost dedication. This vocational approach to sociology would make it necessary to stave off anything that could compromise this pursuit. The framing of intellectual work as divine and unearthly has long-standing historical roots. In previous centuries science was not pursued in order to make a living; rather, following a divine calling, scientists aimed to create knowledge in the likeness of God (Fuller, 2007a). Protected from worldly demands, monasteries were the spaces of knowledge

production during the Middle Ages (Krause, 1996). In fact, academic activity as a professional pursuit is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Until the 1830s, research activity was a privilege that was reserved to wealthy people who had the chance to follow their calling without the constraints of having to earn a living. With the implementation of academic tenure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wealth was no longer a requirement for becoming part of the scientific community (Krause, 1996).

Carl considers the university as one of the last spaces where scientists could follow their intellectual calling without being disturbed. Whilst Carl sees himself following a calling that cannot be explained by such earthly requirements as the securing of income, he perceives restricted material conditions for research as a secular disruption of a divine activity. Rose, a young research fellow, argues that ‘you really needed to do it for its own sake and not for the money’ (*Rose, 29, research fellow, old university*). In the light of today’s scarcity of funding and remuneration, Rose’s statement could equally be read as a slightly defeatist reaction to the material conditions of knowledge production that academics currently face in UK Higher Education. Furthermore, it seems that the argument that one ‘shouldn’t do it for the money’ is another way of describing sociology as a purely vocational pursuit. Both Carl and Rose find themselves in comparatively safe positions. Yet, this seems to create a divide between those who can afford to see it as an entirely vocational pursuit by virtue of their more advanced position and income and those who cannot disregard the lack of a secure position and adequate remuneration for their work.

The framing of sociology as a calling that one follows becomes even more visible in the omnipresent role sociology plays in many of my respondents' lives. Sociology as a way of seeing the world seems to dissolve the boundaries between sociology as work and other spheres of their life. Rose refers to sociology as a particular way of looking at the world that is constantly present in her life.

'I am a sociologist. That's my identity. Full stop. My n.1 identity in any aspect of my life. [...] And the identity as a sociologist, partly it's the effect of being an academic but partly it's just how you look at the world. And I think as a sociologist you look at the world in a different way than you would do otherwise. Maybe as a result of being a sociologist or maybe that's why I chose to be a sociologist. I think it's just an extremely important part of my life.' (*Rose, 29, research fellow, old university*)

Thus, sociological identity does not only manifest itself at the workplace in the university, but also leaves its mark in many spheres of life. Whilst Rose shares her enthusiasm for the discipline with me, she also concedes that the increasing lack of boundaries between the personal sphere and the sphere of work is a feature that cannot be attributed exclusively to what she sees as the sociological calling. Rather, working long hours at the university and at home would be an outcome of the organisation of academic knowledge production.

'Part of it is simply, I think, the job of being an academic which is very badly defined in some ways. I mean I don't mean that in a negative way but it doesn't have very strong boundaries between personal life and work life because being an academic, we don't have to be at our desk at nine o'clock and then to leave at five o'clock. That's not how it works. And certainly, I will pretty much always have my computer on if I am at home. I do a bit of work, then I might watch some TV and then I do some work again. So in that sense there aren't very strong boundaries between my life as a researcher and what I do.' (*Rose, 29, research fellow, old university*)



In similar ways to Carl, Rose implicitly argues that dedication to the subject would be irreconcilable with a nine-to-five regimen. The pursuit of academic work, and thus sociological work, would require commitment. Whilst Carl had elaborated on economic conditions as potentially constraining the vocational pursuit of sociology, the second sphere he mentioned as putting a vocational approach at risk was politics. For him, refraining from politics would be a necessity in order to be completely dedicated to the subject. Carl's view is informed by Max Weber's conception of science as a vocation. In his famous speech 'science as a vocation' Weber outlined the necessity for a separation of the spheres of science and politics. According to Weber, value commitments would have to be kept aside from the pursuit of science in order to guarantee good scientific work (Gerth and Mills, 1991). The reference to Weber's ideas in Carl's narrative becomes even more evident when Carl talks about intellectual embattlement and detachment from ideologies as a requirement for the pursuit of sociology. Detachment from politics as an ideal conceptualisation of sociological activity was only expressed by a few of my respondents.<sup>42</sup> This was particularly the case with respondents whose view of sociology was like Carl's: informed by a Weberian framework or another version of interpretive sociology.

However, respondents with a strong positivist orientation, such as Rose, supported a similar understanding.<sup>43</sup> Rose was trained in empirical sociology and believes in the necessity and possibility of keeping sociology and politics apart. From her

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<sup>42</sup> See 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview' for other respondents with similar perspectives.

<sup>43</sup> We will come back to this commonality of keeping values outside one's sociological work when we will discuss the approach of representatives of both groups to critique as a key feature of sociology.

perspective, sociology can only enter the field of politics once the condition of sufficient evidence is satisfied. According to Rose, sociologists should not talk about politics unless they have enough evidence. ‘Evidence’ is the key word that explains the major difference relative to Carl’s conception of the separation between sociology and politics<sup>44</sup>, which at first sight may appear similar. What follows from that is that sociologists would be in no way more entitled to enter the sphere of politics than other people. Hence, for slightly different reasons, Carl’s and Rose’s narrative stand for a vocational approach to sociology that explicitly seeks to keep any political connotation aside. As discussed at length in ‘Theorising the Link between Social Theory, the Sociological Calling and Sociological Practice’, Alvin Gouldner and C. Wright Mills conceptualise sociology as an activity that cannot be separated from our values. Rather, sociology is seen to affect our practice and as such our politics. Fred’s and Neil’s understanding of sociology as a vocation differs from Carl’s and Rose’s, in that they see critical values and commitment to them in theory and practice as indispensable features of a vocational approach to sociology, and not as a hindrance, as was spelled out by Carl and Rose. Besides, for Fred and Neil, sociology as a vocation is not confined to scholarly work but encompasses all levels of life. Similarly to Carl and Rose, Fred argues that the absolute nature of sociological pursuit would not allow for a clear distinction between work and other spheres.

‘Yes, definitely, I see myself as a sociologist. [...] For me, being a sociologist is not something that only is a nine-to-five job. It is something which I use every day and I see myself as a sociologist 24/7

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<sup>44</sup> In the UK, these ideas have been purveyed in the work of John Goldthorpe as one of the leading proponents of rational choice theory. See Goldthorpe, 2007.

and I see it as a vocation. Something I am very happy to practise and something which I think is very fortunate to engage with and to practise. And I can't imagine anything nicer, being able to live in a society and to understand it at the same time. That is an incredible privilege for me.' (*Fred, 36, lecturer, red brick university*)

While sociology fills large parts of Fred's life, he does not always perceive it as work. The fact that he reads sociology as bedtime reading and that it shapes his experience of the world even in his leisure time can be seen as an illustration of this argument. Fred's more activist leaning toward sociology becomes most visible when he talks about his trade union activities within the university. Whilst Fred is passionate about his subject, he does not romanticise all aspects of his activities, mentioning that sociology would feel least like a vocation and most like a job when he is occupied with RAE issues and marking. Neil is a lecturer in a former polytechnic and researches and teaches Critical Theory. He came to university as a mature student, after having left school early and gaining work experience in the manual sector. Thinking about theory six or seven days a week, he concludes that his degree of immersion could be seen as an indicator of his approach to sociology being vocational.

'I suppose, what I have described is this kind of vocation. My research pretty much takes up all my time. So, I guess that it is a vocation. I am working on research. I am analysing six, sometimes seven days a week. Maybe I take an afternoon off, occasionally. I never really stop kind of thinking about, engaging in sociology. It's not something that ends. I don't see it as a nine-to-five thing. And I don't see it simply as a means of making a living. I see it as a way of communicating critical ideas about the world. So I don't know, that makes it a vocation perhaps. Possibly, I haven't really thought about it.' (*Neil, 42, lecturer, former polytechnic*)

However, as he analyses the fluid boundaries between his academic life and other spheres, he would not wish to see his vocational conception of sociology be based merely on the proportion of time devoted to the subject.

‘My sociology informs my politics, my lifestyle. In that sense it is important. It kind of underpins the way I think about the world. A lot of sociology is rubbish as you know. A lot of it is uncritical. If sociology is meant to be a search for objectivity, no, it doesn’t influence me. But as a critical way of looking at the world, if sociology is a way of looking at the world, yes. To make sense of an individual life, you have to relate that life to broader political and economic processes. [...] Objective analysis informs critical politics. So in that sense sociology informs my political judgements, my political interventions. The things I have done politically in the past.’ (*Neil, 42, lecturer, former polytechnic*)

What Neil considers to be at the forefront of a vocational approach to sociology is the inextricable relationship between a scholarly and a political project. What follows from this for Neil is that we would have an ethical and political responsibility of making the world a better place. Fred’s interpretation of the different dimensions of sociology as a vocation is that thinking in itself can represent a political act.

‘I would like to think of myself as a critical and engaged sociologist and therefore by default, political sociologist in the sense that my research is political. The questions I ask are critical and contentious and in turn political. Sociology can be political. [...] I think as public sociologists, as intellectuals I think it is important that people are engaged in political process, political debate more broadly.’ (*Fred, 36, lecturer, red brick university*)

Fred’s initial comments on sociology and its impact on his leisure time activities could have been interpreted similarly to Carl’s as an expression of the all-encompassing effect of sociology on our lives. Yet, the demarcation to an entirely

different interpretation of vocational sociology is established through Fred's political involvement as a union activist, which he sees as being informed by his sociology. Despite my respondents' different theoretical standpoints, in all of the accounts presented above a glorifying element around the notion of vocation could be observed. This was particularly evident with respondents who reported on the fluid boundaries between work and life and described this as a feature of being a sociologist. In the following, the boundaries between vocation, work and leisure time will be investigated in more detail.

## **4.2 Sociology as Vocation, Work and Leisure Time**

Whilst most respondents considered sociology to have an impact on other dimensions of their lives, for various reasons some of them were nevertheless reluctant to call themselves sociologists outside the workplace.

'Sociology is quite an important part of my identity. I talk about myself as a sociologist. I think that is to do with being part of a culture where that is normal. I think outside of the workplace it is quite difficult to speak about yourself as a sociologist and for that to make sense. I feel quite certain that a sociological perspective on the world is the best sort of perspective to have. So I definitely do. I see myself as a sociologist.'  
(Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university)

Arguing that the workplace has a normative function in how people present themselves, Lydia gently debunks the glamour surrounding the 'sociology as a vocation' narrative. According to her, talking in vocational language would idealise sociology as an activity that could be seen outside of the schemes of paid work. The

professional dictum of sociology's life-encompassing power could also be understood as a justification for the increasing dissociation between work and other spheres of life and the framing of slightly exploitative working conditions as 'normal' or 'ideal',<sup>45</sup> since work provides people with an identity. Lydia suggests that the fact that many sociologists define themselves through their work would not be specific to the sociological profession but would only point to the normative function of describing the self via one's work. This resonates with research into the sociology of occupations and professions more generally, suggesting that 'the particular kind of work people do is frequently central both to their self-identity and to the identity others ascribe to them' (Leidner, 2006: 435). As Leidner further elaborates, 'When socialization is successful they also learn and internalize the occupation's ideology, ethos, traditions, and norms, including criteria for judgment, craft pride, and rules for interacting among themselves and with various others' (Leidner, 2006: 436).

Transferring this to sociology, it seems that the sociological imagination and its all-encompassing nature in the sense of its affecting one's whole life is often taken as a prescription to dissolve the boundaries between the spheres of work and other areas of life. Disciplinary key features are thereby taken as a justification for sociology to take over all aspects of one's life.

Barbara, 46, is a senior lecturer in a former polytechnic. Her narrative presents a counter-voice to viewing sociological activity from an entirely vocational

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<sup>45</sup> These aspects will be discussed again in 'Sociological Practice in its Institutional Framing'.

perspective, thereby disregarding its work character. Whilst Barbara has a strong identity as a sociologist, she also feels as a worker or an employee who can only try to live up to the sociological calling within the realms of the structures of the workplace.

‘Let’s not dress it up and pretend it to be anything else than surviving in a particular kind of work context. So there’s an identity as sociologist in intellectual activity as a lived experience, as being bound up with certain political and social views around the world. But at the same time I can quite see how given the dependence on my salary and working within a certain institution that is ruled by certain political and bureaucratic agendas, which I may not identify with wholly, that I may have to pursue certain actions in order to do that job effectively. So there is this constant tension that is played out between having a job and wanting to pursue certain lines of intellectual inquiry for an alternative social and political use.’ (*Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic*)

According to her, labelling herself as a sociological worker may have to do with her upbringing in a large working-class family and her experience with the world of manual and low-paid work. What becomes powerfully evident in Barbara’s narrative is the tension between, on the one hand, understanding sociology as an occupation that is pursued to make a living, and on the other hand practising sociology as a critical or analytical tradition of lived inquiry. Her statement can be seen as a critique of the failure to acknowledge that sociology is paid work and not merely an intellectual pursuit outside an organisational framework.

In addition to sociology being a vocation or work, my respondents also discussed how and where sociology emerges in their lives outside the workplace. Even if they did not want to be labelled as sociologists, they conceded to becoming aware of their immersion in a sociological way of analysing the world in social situations with

friends and family. Switching ‘off’ a sociological mode of thinking seemed to be difficult for many of my respondents.

‘I am probably seen as a sociologist in the university but I try to make the sociological credo whenever I talk to people privately. Sometimes jokingly, but they would know what to expect from me. If someone comes with an argument of biological determinism I would give them a little lecture. They usually say “what is sociology?”, “why is it useful?” and “I can’t see that it makes a contribution.” And then I would come back with something to have a little discussion and make clear what sociology is about.’ (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

Whilst acknowledging that a sociological outlook would accompany him most of the time, Arthur also emphasises that ‘one is always more than one thing. You can’t reduce someone to a professional role.’ This idea of simultaneous forms of self-understanding is also echoed by David Morgan (Morgan, 1998). He argues that an understanding of being a sociologist as a one-dimensional and all-encompassing concept would neglect the fact that many other features are at play in ‘producing’ sociologists. For Morgan it would be important to develop ‘[...] [a] recognition that sociologists, like everyone else, occupy multiple lives which impact upon each other and depend upon a range of significant others, such as partners, secretaries, cleaners and so forth, in order to bring forth their sociological output’ (Morgan, 1998: 651). Following Morgan, the idea of sociology as an all-encompassing form of self-description would therefore be too narrow as a concept to describe who they are. Many of my respondents saw themselves equally as academics, women, men, fathers, mothers and citizens. Besides, distancing oneself from sociology was also considered a vital way of relating back to the discipline. Whilst stating the constant presence of sociology in his life, Brian emphasised the need to look beyond



sociology as the only intellectually thriving framework to operate in. Rather, he stated the need to look outside sociology as a way of explaining the world and to be open to new approaches. Moreover, sociology would not be a comprehensive concept in describing the entirety of his identity.

‘When I consider myself a sociologist, I take great pride in it but I do not allow it to constrain me. So, for instance, in terms of reading, I deliberately stop myself from reading sociology stuff in the weekend or in the evening. I will deliberately read something that has nothing to do with sociology, although that is easier said than done. So it is hard to switch off. I am not talking about that. But I am talking about reading books or articles that are written for the consumption of the academic community. It is that way of language, that kind of thinking. It is constraining, if that is the only framework within which I operate. Once I am out of my job, I try to go beyond it. For instance, I am very much into Yoga, which directly challenges that kind of mind-body relationship. It is very contradictory to the way I do sociology. I need that to remind myself that I am a sociologist and then I am much bigger than that. And this is very important because otherwise I am constraining my human being-ness. I see the link between being a sociologist and being a human being. But if being a sociologist is everything I have, I would be very disappointed with myself, no matter how big the rewards are, professionally speaking.’ (*Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic*)

Similarly, Annette, a senior lecturer in a university college in London, would see her passion for the subject to be declining if sociology was the only way to understand the world. In this context, she is also critical of sociologists who seem to have an answer for everything and are unable to engage with other bodies of knowledge or forms of explaining the social.

‘At what moments do you carry that identity with you? Do you carry that identity with you all the time? Often it just comes upon you. And probably in relation with sociology I don’t think of that everyday life embodiment issue. I don’t think that I feel that very strongly. And I am also happy about that. Because I have noticed with some sociologists, they always have the answer for everything. You are in the pub. I kind of

try to avoid that. I think you don't learn anything when you do that.'  
(Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College)

So far our discussion of my respondents' relationship with sociology has mostly concerned the effect of sociology on their lives and the distinction between sociology as a vocation and sociology as work. We will now turn to discussing my respondents' relationship with other disciplines, looking at respondents who, whilst being positive about sociology, also question the importance of disciplinary belonging and are more open towards other disciplines.

### **4.3 Sociology as Synthetic Activity**

The different forms of my respondents' identities in relation to sociology are by no means exclusive. In fact, the group of respondents I will present now shares a lot of features with the representatives I discussed earlier. They did not hesitate to introduce themselves as sociologists at an early stage of the interview, and identified their research questions to be sociological in nature; they also describe the sociological tradition as an important point of reference. For all these reasons, their statements embodied a vocational framing of their activities. Yet what is particular about these respondents is their approach to disciplinary identity in itself. Whilst being convinced of the importance of sociology, disciplinary belonging mattered less to them. Their self-understanding as sociologists can be characterised by an attitude of openness to the bodies of knowledge that they considered as relevant to draw on for their research. To put it differently, whereas their work could be

described as sociological in essence, they were less precious about disciplinary boundaries and about the title of sociologist.

‘I am not really worried about the people who influence me, whether they are sociologists or not. And also I am not worried whether it is sociologists who hear me or other people from other disciplines. So, I am a sociologist, but very open to what influences me and to what I can hopefully influence.’ (*Celine, 40, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

Hence, Celine’s identity as a sociologist could be mostly defined through her relationship with various bodies of knowledge outside sociology in a particular way. As one of my respondents put it, what made sociology particularly appealing to him was its ‘intellectual permeability’. This intellectual permeability consists of both the variety of sources that initially formed sociology and its open and problem-oriented outlook. What Stephen refers to as intellectual permeability could just as easily be described as *synthetic*. Having studied anthropology in a rather interdisciplinary way, Stephen’s identification with sociology developed out of an appreciation for the intellectual openness he saw inscribed into the origins of sociology. It is for this reason that Stephen does not wish to make normative statements about the nature of the discipline.

‘I guess I have made this very interdisciplinary journey. I feel very skeptical about those people who want to say sociology should be this. To me it is of value because it is precisely about intellectual permeability. We talked about this book from Wolf Lepenies, which I really love, this idea of the man of science and the man of letters in the early days, in the 18th and 19th century. I kind of buy his argument that there is this kind of oscillation people are leaning towards. I am skeptical of the desire to canonise and to make boundaries around the discipline in that way. I increasingly think of myself as belonging to that sort of

strange disparate family of ideas that are collected under the banner of sociology.’ (Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College)

In describing sociology’s open character, Stephen refers to Lepenies’ work on the origins of sociology that is drawn from literature on the one hand and the natural sciences on the other (Lepenies, 1988). Rather than understanding these origins as one of sociology’s inherent key conflicts, Stephen identifies intellectual permeability as one of sociology’s key features. He is well aware of the fact that his understanding of sociology as intellectually permeable or synthetic is by no means shared by everyone. According to him, the intellectually permeable nature of sociology would contradict a normative stance on what sociology is or has to be. As a consequence, the process of labelling oneself as a sociologist rather than as a member of a related discipline would lose its significance. As we will discuss in more detail in ‘Sociological Becomings’, ultimately, one’s view of sociology’s open or more closed character seems to depend very much on the kind of intellectual socialisation we went through. We could see this with Stephen labelling himself as a sociologist as a result of a very interdisciplinary background.

In a similar vein, in her autobiographical accounts, Patricia Hill Collins describes the eclectic way in which she was taught sociology at Brandeis College and how this shaped her approach to sociology: ‘I am grateful that this is the sociology that I learned. My professors asked big, interesting, and important questions, assigned original works, and trusted in our ability to think. [...] There was no ‘group think’ of having to memorize the ‘right answers’ for the test but instead a sustained emphasis on developing sociology majors who were synthetic, analytical thinkers. I came to

love the puzzle-solving challenges of doing synthetic, conceptual work, for example, speculating about the connections between Marx and Freud or, later on, between William E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Frantz Fanon [...] I learned to be an eclectic thinker, to take the best from a range of thinkers, and leave the rest behind' (Hill Collins, 2005: 102).

In contrast to Stephen and Hill Collins, who see this interdisciplinary outlook as directly emerging from their framing of sociology, other respondents felt the need to justify their practice of drawing on a variety of sources. This defense mechanism was mostly related to having been socialised in an environment where a more purist attitude to the boundaries of sociology with regard to other disciplines was considered to be the norm. A more synthetic approach to sociology could be observed especially in respondents who had either studied various subjects, and thus had more interdisciplinary backgrounds, or with respondents whose socialisation into sociology took place at an institution that emphasised a more synthetic approach to sociology. Their particular understanding of sociology as a subject that draws on various sources resulted in their feeling less precious about the label of their activities. The mere attempt to define what sociology is and to dictate what it should be was therefore not of core significance to them.<sup>46</sup> Stephen's approach to sociology as an open field that allows the weaving-in of other sources with respect to the questions that need to be answered is further reinforced by Brian. Brian, a reader in a former polytechnic, still considers sociology as his home. He stresses that in seeking

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<sup>46</sup> See 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview' for further examples.

to answer sociological questions we also needed to look beyond sociology as a body of knowledge.

‘I have never been precious about disciplinary boundaries. [...] Sociology is still my home, my professional home, professional identity and label, if you like. But I also believe that sociology as a body of knowledge has its own strengths and weaknesses, as with all other bodies of knowledge, psychology or whatever. So it has its own limitations. There are certain things that sociology cannot explain, not to the level I like, individual difference, where psychology plays a more satisfying role to me. While I identify myself as a sociologist, I am never precious about it. [...] So I would consider myself as a sociologist. But I long for opportunities to work with other people. Not without the challenges and difficulties, of course, in different areas. [...] But it is actually important to do that. I think when we are too precious about our own territorial identity, it becomes quite close-minded. There is always a danger that we become too knowledgeable and extremely narrow-minded.’ (*Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic*)

On the basis of his interdisciplinary outlook, Brian re-emphasised his sociological identity. Brian’s statement could be read as a continuation of keeping alive a moment in sociology that has always been present since its beginnings and is mostly associated with the work of Auguste Comte. Comte hoped to unify all studies of humankind – including biology, history, psychology and economics – under the roof of sociology. Whereas sociology drew on all of these disciplines, for Comte, sociology’s all-encompassing perspective was what distinguished sociology from other disciplines. For this reason, sociology is referred to as the ‘queen of the social sciences’ and Comte, who coined the notion of sociology in 1838, is known as the ‘Father of Sociology’ (Seidman, 2008). However, it needs to be stressed that my respondents’ narratives that I introduced in this chapter – Stephen, Celine, Brian – indicate that their conceptualisation of sociology as a synthetic activity is not quite the same as the one that Comte envisioned. Rather, Comte’s slightly imperialistic

view of synthesis could not be traced in the narratives of the respondents I had presented here. There seems to be a substantial difference between a strong version of holism in Comte's sense that defines sociology as dominant and a weak version of integration that defines sociology in terms of openness – or as Stephen put it, 'intellectual permeability'. Whilst Comte perceived sociology to be drawing on knowledge from different disciplines, he did not see sociology in such a permeable way as Stephen. This would have been in tension with the claim of sociology being the 'queen of the social sciences'. In contrast to that, Stephen's, Brian's and Celine's understanding of synthesis as open and permeable seems to subordinate sociology as a distinctive discipline to the requirements of inter-disciplinary dialogue. In this reluctance to imperialise sociology and disciplinary belonging we can see the main difference in how the respondents I introduced in this chapter – Stephen, Celine, Brian – conceptualised synthesis as opposed to Auguste Comte. However, in 'Synthesis' we will introduce to some of my respondents who can be seen as representatives of the 'queen of the social sciences' synthesis narrative that is informed by Comte.

#### **4.4     *Sociology as a Marginalising Force – Outsiders within Sociology***

I will now introduce the reader to a group of sociologists who is reluctant clearly to identify as such, giving themselves other names – criminologist, gender studies person, feminist, social historian, social policy researcher, social scientist, social statistician, to name a few. Their more distant relationship with sociology can be

seen as a result of their being marginalised within the discipline. In the following, we will distinguish two types of marginalisation.

For some of my respondents, their marginalisation within academia is a perpetuation of experiencing discrimination in society due to gender, ethnicity and social class. Lower positions in academia or constrained conditions in the pursuit of research may be examples for partial exclusion and marginalisation of scholars due to their race, ethnicity, gender or social class. Yet, very often these marginalisations are not confined to material conditions alone; rather, it is also the intellectual work of these respondents that seems to be marginalised within the field and not receiving due attention. Whilst these states of marginalisation on an ontological and epistemological level may not necessarily be linked to each other, they often seem to be interrelated.

For the second group of respondents, marginalisation within the discipline is not related to their socio-economic background, but is rather a result of their particular epistemological position; for example, its positioning at the periphery of the discipline in a particular country. Robert K. Merton's work on insider and outsider perspectives in sociology and Patricia Hill Collins' work on outsiders within sociology will provide helpful tools in looking at my respondents' complex relationships with sociology.

We will first look at respondents whose marginalisation consists in their epistemological standpoints being located at the periphery of the discipline in a



country. Merton understands the concept of insiders and outsiders in a dynamic way. Whilst certain structural conditions, such as a sociologist's social class, gender and race, could make the occurrence of an outsider status more likely, Merton does not see outsider status as being restricted to socio-economic exclusion only. Rather, sociologists' outsider status within their field may also be related to certain paradigms being more prevalent in a country than others, consequently making their work appear to be located at the margins within this context (Merton, 1972). Merton's argument of insiders and outsiders within sociology, and its dynamic character, can be illustrated by the condition of comparative isolation experienced by quantitatively-oriented sociologists in the UK, and their effect on British sociology as a whole – such as the Nuffield cluster around John Goldthorpe – as compared to their work having a high impact on sociology in the Northern European countries and in the US.<sup>47</sup> Victor introduces himself as a social statistician, or as a social researcher. Whilst he was an outsider in statistics and maths, he feels equally at the margins in British sociology. The kind of sociology he does is more akin to the tradition of the US or of the Northern European countries.

'I do see myself as a social researcher in a broad sense. It has considerable emphasis. So, going to conferences and things, these days, I feel myself to be an extreme. Not a very sophisticated statistician these days. [...] I am a British sociologist by a personal. And all my academic history is within Britain. However, in terms of the style of sociology which I do, there is a sense in which it has a greater affiliation with continental European sociology. The actual style of sociologist I am it would be more likely to find in North America than here. It always seems to me that Sociology Departments in Britain are very different.

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<sup>47</sup> It is not a coincidence that in his latest oeuvre 'On Sociology' (Goldthorpe, 2007), John Goldthorpe essentially makes a critique of British sociology and what he sees as the roots of the discipline's crisis in this country, namely, the increasingly distant relationship of theory and research. Goldthorpe aims to counter this by promoting a new mainstream for sociology, combining the demonstrated strengths of large-scale quantitative research and the explanatory power of social action theory.

When I did my PhD in Oxford there wasn't a Sociology Department. They do a rather more homogeneous kind of sociology. Again in a sense that is in some way much more the sociology I do. And it has a very distinct identity. The strong links, you have this kind of primarily quantitative center, stratification, and you know there are other things. But in a sense, you have individuals like myself, a relatively self-contained research niche.' (Victor, 42, senior lecturer, 60s university)

Victor's narrative already illustrates the impact his sociological socialisation had on his subsequent relationship with sociology and what he considers to be sociology.<sup>48</sup> His emphasis on empirical research makes him feel more affine to the empirical traditions within sociology. Yet, Victor reports feeling like an outsider in the British sociology landscape. As he explains, this may have something to do with the kind of sociology that is dominant in the UK (Payne *et al.*, 2004; Erikson, 2005). In a study that Payne *et al.* carried out on major British sociology journals, they found out that 19 out of 20 empirically-based journal articles employed a qualitative approach (Payne *et al.*, 2004). Whilst an increase in the teaching of quantitative methods may be reported, partly in response to the new regulations of the ESRC, which link ESRC postgraduate funding to the obligatory provision of both qualitative and quantitative research methods training (ESRC, 2005), there seem to be long-standing resistance and anxieties around the use of quantitative methods (Payne *et al.*, 2004). As quantitative traditions are not very well developed in British sociology (Payne *et al.*, 2004; Erikson, 2005), Victor shifts among the identities of a social demographer, a social statistician and a social scientist. Hence, in Mertonian terms, Victor could be considered to be at the periphery of what counts as sociology in the UK, as this approach is comparatively marginalised in this country as compared to central

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<sup>48</sup> We will discuss this theme in more detail in 'Becoming a Sociologist through Marginalisation'.

Europe or the US, where a quantitative approach is in places the predominant form of sociology, and hence very much the discipline's center.

Martin faces similar difficulties in seeing himself as a sociologist within the British context. Having gone through extensive empirical research training in the US, he thinks he counts less in a country in which the elite has always been defined by the classics and an anti-quantitative-methods atmosphere in sociology is palpable.

'It depends what you mean by sociologist, I suppose. I don't think that I am typical of a lot of contemporary sociology because I feel that my work is much more empirical and quantitative. And I think sociology may be beginning to engage with these issues a bit more, but I don't feel particularly central to sociology. It is a cultural thing. If you look at the British elite, it has been more about classics. Even science and engineering have struggled. There is a strong kind of, sometimes it is a bit of a hierarchical thing. If you are technical you are not respected as much. I think what happened was that an immense distrust of quantification, first of all. There was a kind of skepticism about sociology in America, which was really empiricist, which I don't think quantitative work in Britain was. I wonder how much it is that there is an aversion to and almost, this sounds horrible to say, but a lack of capacity to deal with it and an unwillingness to work with statisticians. Often it is difficult to deal with statisticians because they don't have a sociological perspective. If you can't do it yourself, it is largely carried out in social policy departments.' (*Martin, 60, lecturer, 60s and old university*)

Martin, then, explains his outsider status within British sociology through the history of sociology in this country and the prevalence of social theory and qualitative methods in comparison to quantitative methods. According to Martin, quantitative traditions within sociology would be found with increasing frequency in critical social-policy research clusters rather than in Sociology Departments.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> According to Sue Duncan, the UK's first Chief Government Social Researcher, sociological research in this country rather focuses on 'how' and 'why' and 'under what circumstances' questions rather than on those in a combination with 'how much'

Yet, the status of an outsider within sociology may not merely be the result of a particular set of ideas finding less resonance in the intellectual tradition of a country compared to others. The marginalisation of a body of knowledge may also go hand-in-hand with material marginalisation through one's being part of a certain socio-economic group. For these respondents, the marginalisation of their intellectual work under the roof of sociology is related to their marginalisation in society and also in Higher Education due to their race and ethnicity, their gender, their sexual orientation or their class. For these respondents, the lack of representation of their bodies of knowledge in sociology cannot be seen in separation from their being outsiders within the field.

Victoria, a professor in a former polytechnic, was trained in sociology. Victoria cannot separate the discipline as a body of knowledge from the profession and the people who produce sociology. According to her, the profession would contradict itself, not living up to the aspirations they set out with. For this reason, she cannot hold the profession in high esteem and does not wish to be labelled a sociologist.

'I don't really hold the profession in high esteem. There is a sense in which I can't separate the profession from the situation, the context within which I am doing my profession. I can't separate being a sociologist from the institutional setting in which I practise sociology. And as I and others conveyed, it's often a situation or a context that is full of oppression, struggle, having to navigate one's position. Having to justify being where you are and outside as we referred to in the article, using the words and work of Bell Hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, black women who have written on black women's experiences in other

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questions. Duncan argues that the relationship between public policy and sociology is a 'relationship of unfulfilled potential, rather than irrelevance' (Burnett (interviewer) and Duncan, 2008: 294).

contexts. And so because, a) the profession and b) the institutional context, or be it informed by some liberal notion or liberal philosophy. In reality that is not the way I experience sociology. That's not how I experience sociology, as a liberating and liberal arena. Nor do I experience the universities I have worked in, including the one I am in, as indeed liberal institutions.' (*Victoria*, 48, *professor, former polytechnic*)

Hence, with the undervalued epistemic status of their work and their material marginalisation within academia being interrelated, some of my respondents' relationship with sociology – not only as a body of knowledge, but also as an institution and as a professional body – can be described as problematic. Patricia Hill Collins' contributions are important for an understanding of the interrelated nature of the marginalisation of knowledge producers within society due to their socioeconomic status, gender and race *and* the effect this has on the status of the knowledge produced by them (Hill Collins, 1986; Hill Collins, 2000). Hill Collins argues that black women have long occupied marginal positions in academic settings and are therefore 'outsiders within status' (Hill Collins, 1986). This is also related to their knowledge not being reflected in what is called the key body of the discipline: 'Much of my work on standpoint epistemology was catalyzed by these early experiences of trying to come to terms with the race and class politics that I encountered as a Brandeis undergraduate. Standpoint epistemology links experiences with consciousness, power relations with the knowledge that explains social realities' (Hill Collins, 2005: 98). Yet, as Hill Collins further points out, '[...] many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality – their "outsider within" status – to produce Black feminist thought that reflects a special standpoint on self, family and society' (Hill Collins, 1986: 14).

This marginalisation of ideas within sociology, along with their already-existent marginalisation in society and in particular within academia, can be seen in many of my respondents' narratives.<sup>50</sup> Whilst some of them may be labelled as sociologists by the nature of their work, they did not wish to use this label, as the discipline does not represent them and their knowledge. Their work often gives voice to groups in society that are not that well represented, and applies particularly to research on gender, sexuality and race. Some of my respondents' distancing from the label of sociology can therefore be seen as a form of protest against the positions they see underlying mainstream sociology. This sense of double identities and outsider status was particularly prevalent with many female sociologists in the field of gender studies. Whilst gender studies became more integrated into sociology and are taught and researched, these ideas are still less prevalent in what is known as the canon of social theory (Pullen, 1999; Delamont, 2003). As their intellectual work and epistemological standpoints are still far from being reflected in the main body of sociological knowledge, a lot of women who work on gender studies in Sociology Departments cannot say with strong conviction that they are sociologists.

Janet works in a five-star Sociology Department and finds herself in a very privileged position. Whilst Janet recognises the overlaps between sociology and gender studies, she does not see sociology as her primary identity. Rather, she sees herself as a feminist social scientist.

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<sup>50</sup> In 'Living Synthesis: Transforming Sociology from Within and Outside' we will come back to how sociologists have been making creative use of their marginality, thereby challenging mainstream sociology.

‘I guess, the issue of disciplinary identities is a very complex one. Do I see myself as a sociologist? I wouldn’t say that that was my primary identity. But yes, I have no problem with people describing me as a sociologist. And certainly I work in a Sociology Department and I am very, very happy there. But actually I think of myself as very interdisciplinary. And certainly my intellectual home is definitely gender studies. That’s my primary affiliation. I did all my graduate work in gender studies, that’s my kind of passion. If I am not in a gender studies environment, then a Sociology Department is a very comfortable one for me. But I guess there are ways in which I feel not particularly sociological. There are certain kinds of theoretical traditions that I am not hugely well-versed in. And then there are other theoretical traditions that I am very familiar with which probably not a lot of sociologists are. But essentially I would say we are interested in similar sorts of things. But because I come out of from this feminist perspective – which you know, there is a strong tradition of feminist sociology, certainly – but it is slightly different.’ (*Janet, 31, research fellow, 60s university*)

In this chapter we described two major types of outsider status. The marginalisation of sociologists within the main paradigms of thought prevalent in one country needed to be put into perspective with other forms of marginalisation related to socio-economic status, gender and race that we discussed subsequently. Whilst quantitative sociology is a comparatively small field in the UK, the marginalisation of these respondents mainly consists in their lack of representation in what the discipline stands for in this country, rather than in deprived research and teaching conditions.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to that, the second type of outsider status we described faces marginalisation both on material and epistemological levels. With this kind of marginalisation manifesting itself on multiple levels – and not just being confined to a lack of a sense of belonging to crucial research clusters throughout the country – marginalisation is filled with a very different meaning.

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<sup>51</sup> It is particularly worth pointing to this materially privileged position in the context of the ESRC fostering a quantitative-methods initiative, hoping for more social scientists to achieve a quantitative orientation (ESRC, 2005).

## 5 Sociological Becomings

In the previous chapter we explored my respondents' relationships with sociology by looking at how they labelled their work. In this chapter we are interested in the roots of these relationships. As Horowitz put it in his preface of a collective portrait of sociological self-images in the 1970s, 'The process of a person becoming a sociologist is intimately linked to the sociologist becoming a person' (Horowitz, 1970b: 12).

What was it that triggered my respondents' interest and made them follow a particular path? How did they find avenues for pursuing sociology and how did they get socialised into sociology? Retrospective journeys into their biographies, educational histories and socioeconomic background may provide tentative answers to these questions. Chriss summarises that for Gouldner, '[...] both direct experience of the social world, and exposure to texts (or other scholars' ideas) contribute to social scientists' theoretical orientations and paradigmatic worldviews' (Chriss, 1999: 110). Similarly, 'social scientists' tacit knowledge of the social world is inexorably intertwined with their attempts to thematise these background understandings in the form of scientific theory' (Chriss, 1999: 110).

Yet, not only are we interested in my respondents' stories of sociological becoming, we also want to know how they give their account of this process. The genre of



autobiographical narration may bring about an even stronger temptation of reconstructing a neat narrative. With regard to sociology, David Morgan argues that ‘[...] in writing about ourselves we also construct ourselves as somebody different from the person who routinely and unproblematically inhabits and moves through social space and time’ (Morgan, 1998: 655). With this in mind, we want to pay careful attention to the stories my respondents tell us about the origins of their relationships with sociology.

### **5.1 *Becoming a Sociologist: Childhood and Teenage Memories and Linear Paths into Sociology***

Asked about how they came to sociology, many of my respondents said that they had always had an interest in asking questions about the underpinnings of social phenomena. The idea that sociology had been *with* them or *in* them for most of their lives – even though they were unaware of it at the time – was present in most of my respondents’ narratives. While they did not have a language to frame these interests and to relate them to a subject they were familiar with at the time, with the sociological tools they hold in hand now, they are now able to identify these early childhood and teenage-years reflections as sociological.

‘When I look back, I have always been interested in sociological questions. The question I asked in my history A-level class was a sociological question. I grew up in a very politicised family. I was always interested in why do all the kids at school think the monarchy is a good thing? I was fascinated by ideology. I read the communist manifesto when I was twelve, thirteen. I have always been interested in those sorts of things. It was not that my parents were sociologists, but

they were political. The way in which sociology is political, sort of is part of my trajectory.’ (Hayley, 42, professor, red brick university)

Hayley reads her own narrative in a sociological way by drawing attention to the Millsian connection of the biographical and the political. From her point of view, her politicised family background resulted in her particular approach to sociology. In a similar vein, Brian, a reader from a former polytechnic who did his first degree in Asia, mentions that he had always been interested in the relationships between people and the constituents of society. Now, as an experienced sociologist, he frames this early interest in a sociological way, namely, as an interest in ‘people’s construction of meaning’.

‘At the time, sociology was not a subject offered in secondary school. So the only chance to do it was at university. I have always been interested in people, and how people relate to each other, and how people construct meaning, although at the time I wouldn’t phrase it as such. But I have always been interested in how people make sense of life. Not just about broad issues about life and death, but about day-to-day issues, about what to wear, which people to go out with, whatever. I have always been drawn to this subject, sociology, when I read about it and when I was doing my A-levels, the equivalent of A-levels.’ (Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic)

Whilst sociological imagination was often presented as having emerged at a very early age, the distinction that my respondents drew between them and others also suggested that sociological imagination was specific to them. According to Hayley, her early inclination towards sociological thinking would have become apparent in the questions she asked at school and their having differed from her peers’ questions. Hence, my respondents’ pursuit of sociology many years later was often presented as a natural and inevitable consequence of these early childhood traits of

sociological thought. The way in which these stories about the origins of sociology in their lives are told therefore resembled portraits of a vocational calling. Yet, it seemed that my respondents' socio-economic background did play a significant role in how the emergence of their vocational calling was presented. The unquestioned factuality with which some respondents talked about their A-levels and their decision to study sociology at university also suggested that the very fact of going to university was itself almost taken for granted. Hence, since for some respondents Higher Education seemed to have been a social route almost pre-determined by their social class, this also affected the way in which they reconstructed the emergence of sociological thought in their lives. The straightforward manner with which the emergence of sociological imagination was presented and subsequently pursued was not characteristic of all of my respondents. This was particularly true of respondents who had come from a working-class background. In the next section, we will therefore take a closer look at how marginalised positions in society impacted on my respondents' processes of sociological becoming.

## **5.2    *Becoming a Sociologist through Marginalisation***

We would like to follow the theme of marginalisation both in its potential evoking of sociological imagination as well as in its shaping of my respondents' paths into sociology. As we will see, these paths into sociology are radically different to the ones presented earlier. In alignment with C. Wright Mills, Barbara argues that a sociological way of approaching the world is by no means exclusive to sociologists.

Rather, as Barbara suggests, almost everyone would have a 'natural' inclination to ask sociological questions.

'Do I think of myself as a sociologist? I suppose if you think of C. Wright Mills, I had some of the sociological imagination from an early age that comes from having a kind of critical perspective or that emanates from living in the material world. In that sense, it is outside of a professional body and there are a lot of people with that.' (*Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic*)

She explains her development of a sociological imagination with her having lived 'in the material world'. What Barbara means by this, is that the experience of social deprivation in a large working-class family and her experience in the world of work as an almost unskilled working-class woman had drawn her towards a more skeptical and critical perspective on the world, before finally coming to university at the age of 27.

'All kinds of ugly feminised low-paid, relatively low-skilled work. From dental surgeries to nursing homes, factories, offices, bars, all sorts. I was either getting sacked or telling them that I would leave. I had this kind of aimless orientation to the world. And I couldn't adapt easily either to the particular types of feminities that occurred there in the workplace. Of course I didn't have a language for this at that time. All I knew was that it all seemed very strange and irksome and tedious. And I was a bit of an autodidact. I was a drifting working-class girl searching for meaning, really. So I used to frequent second-hand bookshops and to pick things up and I happened to come across the German Ideology and thought the man was a poet. I hadn't heard of him before, but to me he was an absolute poet. At last there was somebody who captured something, that kind of experience and perspective on the world. And I continued to have these rather aimless jobs and then decided to go to night school, because I didn't have anything really, no real qualifications. And I worked in a nursing home at that time. And then I did O-levels and A-levels at night school.' (*Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic*)

Whilst Barbara considers her background to have had an impact on her sociological becoming and her epistemological position, she would not wish to essentialise social class – working class – as the baseline for a critical approach to the world and, subsequently, her pursuit of sociology. However, her coming from a working-class background in which education, and particularly Higher Education, were not inscribed into her life plan and set by her parents, certainly had an impact on *how* and *when* she came to sociology as a field of study and pursuit. Barbara's description of having found something in sociology that reflected her own life experience also seems to resonate with Patricia Hill Collins' outline of her epistemological position and her sociological becoming, coming from a marginalised background, being a black, working-class woman: 'Pragmatically, I had to make it through school. Sociology was one important place where race was taken seriously so that seemed like the best fit for me' (Hill Collins, 2005: 103).

Hill Collins, who started her sociology degree at Brandeis University in 1965 as one of the only African-Americans at the time, elaborates on how her positioning had affected her sociological studies and her theoretical standpoints: '[...] I questioned how the absence of Black students might affect the type of education I could expect. [...] These differences of race and class epitomized my marginality as a Black student in an overwhelmingly white school and a working-class student attending school with children of middle-class and affluent parents. They also predisposed me to ask very different questions than the majority of my classmates. [...] I was an insider where few other Black students had gone before. At the same time, I perpetually felt like an outsider – I wasn't white, affluent, Jewish, or suburban. It

was only years later when I wrote about the notion of ‘outsider within’ positioning that I came to see how my own intellectual and political development had been so affected by my social location’ (Hill Collins, 2005: 99).<sup>52</sup>

Whilst marginalisation can be located on various levels and in the intersectionality of gender, class and ethnicity, social class seemed to have a large impact on my respondents’ educational careers and sociological positions. Many of my respondents entered sociology at a comparatively late stage in their lives, having left school early and looking back to the experience of working in unskilled and low-paid jobs. Whilst entering Higher Education as a mature student is not the necessary outcome of a marginalised position in society, it makes linear educational careers less likely. Not only did some of these respondents enter sociology later than their peers, their decision to do sociology and to come to university in the first place was often informed by what they had experienced before.

Neil describes himself as ‘a social theorist leaning towards the philosophy and the sociology camp’. He left school early and was working in low-paid jobs before coming to university as a mature student. Sociology appealed to him as it made him understand his own experience of ‘alienation from the world of work’ in a different way. For him, the experience of working in low-paid jobs had an impact on the standpoint he now takes within sociology.

‘I kind of left school when I was sixteen. And for a few years I was working in various positions, clerical, and also other forms of

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<sup>52</sup> As will be discussed in more detail in ‘Living Synthesis: Transforming Sociology from Within and Outside’, marginalisation has often been used as a stimulus for creativity in challenging mainstream sociological thought and practice.

employment, manual employment as well, factory work. I guess I got a bit bored and thought that there must be more to life than this kind of work. I started off by doing A-level sociology and also psychology. I did that in evening classes before deciding where my interests lie. And I did literature in evening classes. That's how it unfolded, alienation from the world of work.' (Neil, 43, *lecturer, former polytechnic*)

However, the narrative of a working-class background and its necessarily resulting in a fragmented career path cannot be seen in the account given by Catherine, a 28-year-old research fellow at an old university. Like Barbara and Neil, Catherine had left school early and worked in low-level jobs. However, going into evening schools soon after that, she entered university almost at the same age as her peers from other socio-economic backgrounds. Whilst Catherine's case and her fast upward mobility in Higher Education in prestigious universities cannot be seen as an example of a career disrupted by social class, she nevertheless describes her working-class roots as having been relevant for her sociological work. She illustrates this by explaining that her research interests are directly related to her biographical history.

'Ok, I left school at sixteen and went to work in a factory. And a couple of years into that I decided to take some evening classes. And originally I went to study English at night school and I enjoyed that. So and then I decided to take sociology and I did well in both of those subjects and it then occurred to me that I could apply to university. And I enjoyed sociology because coming from a working-class background made me interested in the kind of social structures that determined how your social origins affect you. I wanted to look into sociology further and I guess I continued with that, looking at social class and ethnic inequalities and access to Higher Education in the UK.' (Catherine, 28, *research fellow, old university*)

Catherine sees her biography as relevant for her research into social class and inequality but concedes that most of her academic peers had chosen research topics that were meaningful to them in their lives. This suggests that with most research

there seems to be a connection between people's lives and the topics they choose to research.

### **5.3 *Becoming a Sociologist Through Interdisciplinary Journeys***

In this chapter we will discuss ways into sociology through interdisciplinary journeys. Many of my respondents first started their studies in history, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, English, politics, economics or statistics. Some of my respondents observed that the questions they were interested in were not asked in these disciplines. Elizabeth, a lecturer at an old university, reports that her mentors in her politics undergraduate degree identified her 'real' interest as being sociological in nature. She subsequently went into sociology.

'Some of my tutors at that time said, oh really, you are interested in sociology. Not government, not political science strictly speaking, not the study of parties but the political aspects of class and sort of group formation. So that directed me into sociology. I had a tutor who recommended me to do sociology. This is where I ended up doing my MA.' (*Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university*)

Carl studied during the 1960s and came to sociology via literature.

'Well, I was studying during the late sixties. So I was at university during the student movement in the sixties, at the height of the student movement and the occupations and all these kinds of things. And initially I was very much into literature, history and art. But then the way the curriculum was organised, one of the things I studied was sociology. And also the discipline was very fashionable at that time. The questions I was asking led me to sociology and away from literature. That is how I



came into sociology. In the late sixties it was the subject in which people were reflecting on the world to the greatest degree.’ (*Carl, 64, senior lecturer, red brick university*)

In this context, it is worth noting that the widespread existence of sociology at degree level is a relatively recent phenomenon in the UK. Sociology was only widely implemented as a discipline in some universities, notably in the leading universities of Oxford and Cambridge, in the 1960s (Halsey, 2004). Particularly with respondents from older birth cohorts, the prevalence of the LSE as the key institution for sociological socialisation for a long time needs to be noted. At high-school level, pupils have only been able to study sociology and take it at A-level since 1964 (Platt, 2008). Thus, older birth cohorts amongst my respondents in particular did not have a chance to relate their interest to sociology to a subject at school. As a result of this lack of reference points at school and university that would have channeled their existing interests, many were drawn to subjects at school that were occupied with similar questions. In fact, many of my respondents pointed out that the study of several disciplines had sensitised them to the fact that sociology draws on different disciplines and bodies of knowledge. As Stanley notes, the fact that these ‘professional sociologists’ and ‘departmental sociologists’ do not hold sociology undergraduate degrees themselves, has not prevented them from becoming ‘core sociologists’ (Stanley, 2005).<sup>53</sup> According to Halsey, the significance of the London School of Economics in these early decades of British sociology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century must not be underestimated. Students were trained as sociologists, yet having to engage with a variety of subjects such as economics, history and politics (Halsey,

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<sup>53</sup> As we will discuss in further detail in ‘Synthesis’, studying different disciplines and reading widely was in fact considered as a prerequisite of good sociological work by many of my respondents.

2004). Due to their later significance for what was then the expansion of sociology in the post-war years, Halsey labels these early professional sociologists who were mainly trained at the LSE as 'sleepwalkers' (Halsey, 2004). The significance of the LSE as the leading institution within British sociology until the late 1950s becomes even more evident in George's account, who describes his journeys into sociology and the role that LSE, Oxford and Cambridge had played at the time.

'Sociology I had not heard of. That was in the late 1950s. One of my schoolmasters was an economist and had studied at the LSE. That really did engage me. So I decided I would do sociology. Well, at that time there were three universities at which you could read sociology, but none of them were Oxford or Cambridge. But the expectation was that I would go to Oxford or Cambridge. There was a degree at Oxford, Politics, Philosophy and Economics, PPE, but that there was no paper in sociology which you could take. There was an economics tripos in Cambridge. Likewise there was no paper in sociology that you could take. And I wasn't interested in doing a paper in sociology in a three-year degree. In the end I went to Nottingham. There were two sociologists teaching there. But it was very good. There were five students only. It was very individual teaching. Not an onerous timetable by any means. A great deal of time to read and expert guidance and critical discussion on what you read and wrote. Was the decision I had never regretted. And then I went to the LSE to do graduate work. And again, I had no regrets about that at all. The LSE at that time was a very exciting place to be. Everybody who was anybody in French, American and British sociology came through the senior common room at some point at the LSE and you got to meet them. So that was very stimulating.' (*George, 64, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

The pattern of having engaged with various disciplines and subsequently developing a strong sociological identity is, however, not confined to the older birth cohorts that I have just mentioned. It can also be seen with Stephen, a professor from a university college in London, who says that he became 'an advocate of sociology,' although he never studied sociology. Being an anthropologist by training, he could not relate to the way 'anthropology was constructed in the mid 1980s [where] you had to go far

away in order to count as anthropologist. I was more interested in what was happening at the bus stop than what was happening far off-shore.’ (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

Stephen found that the problems prevalent at the height of the Thatcher era would be equally worthy of study. He describes the place where he studied anthropology as quite broad, intellectual and eclectic. His first academic job was in cultural studies, followed by an appointment in a Sociology Department. Whilst this would suggest that his institutional affiliation with a Sociology Department ultimately made him a sociologist, he quickly dismisses the idea of the importance of disciplinary belonging. What matters much more to him than disciplinary affiliation are the questions that we deal with and try to answer.

‘The disciplinary label “sociology” with a big S or “politics” with a big P and “anthropology” with a big A matter less than the questions we are interested in and the publics we are seeking to address. That has always been my philosophy which I know a lot of people have different concerns about the discipline. I feel part of the sociological discipline but I didn’t start out in it. I kind of became a sociologist through being drawn to those ideas and I guess to the key writers in the discipline as such. The books that I admire and the writers that I admire, that are with me all the time include sociologists, but they are not only sociologists, alongside Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and those kind of figures. You can see an eclectic mix of interests.’ (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

Being driven by the question itself rather than its disciplinary label, he has been reading widely, irrespective of an author’s disciplinary affiliation. This already points us to an observation that we will look at in far more detail throughout this study, namely, that respondents who had been in touch with various subjects in the

past may show a particularly open-minded approach to sociology and could be understood as true representatives of what we will later identify as one of sociology's key features: synthesis. This, in fact, already points us to stating that respondents with a rather interdisciplinary outlook do have a particularly open-minded relationship with sociology and could be described as getting very close to the original vision of sociology as a synthetic discipline.<sup>54</sup>

The various trajectories taken by my respondents into the subject seem to shape how they subsequently relate to sociology and where they find themselves within it. This became particularly prevalent with sociologists who had studied subjects such as maths or statistics before doing a further degree or PhD in sociology.

Victor is a senior lecturer at a 60s university. He studied statistics and maths before doing a PhD in sociology. While he found pleasure in doing maths, his real interest lay in problems in the social world and issues of class and inequality, none of which were reflected in his studies. His interest in social problems and looking at the world were further triggered by a close friend who studied sociology. Whilst coming to sociology was a good change from the statistics degree, the sociology he experienced outside of the place where he finally did his sociology PhD did not fit his expectations of what sociology should be, either.

‘As I moved to sociology, it kind of combined the numerical ability that I had already with the broad sense that there was something that sociologists might be looking at, which I was interested in. I have always

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<sup>54</sup> We will come back to this in different points in this thesis – ‘Synthesis’, ‘Sociology’s Synthetic Character at Risk’ and ‘Living Synthesis’.

been interested in issues of social class but not in an abstract sense. And also I have always been interested in intimate relationships. I know that sounds very strange, also in a broader sense. Those are the things, class and relationships. How I came in is actually sideways. A relative naïve idea of what sociology actually is.’ (*Victor, 42, senior lecturer, 60s university*)

This process of sociological becoming may be seen in the light of Lepenies’ description of the sociological tradition. Going back to the origins of sociology, Lepenies describes sociology as a discipline that was leaning towards the arts of letters on the one hand and the natural sciences on the other hand (Lepenies, 1988). Whilst the divide between these paradigms of interpretativism and positivism are by no means as stark as they were at the time of the second Positivismusstreit and in the 1970s, sociologists are nevertheless drawn towards one of these camps. How sociologists relate to certain selective aspects of what is called “sociology” may therefore not only be a result of their general worldview and inclinations, but also of the bodies of knowledge that informed and shaped their thought prior to getting into sociology.

With Carl, who can be labelled as a representative of the old humanist format, we met a sociologist whose understanding of sociology is decidedly different from Victor’s. Carl’s engagement with humanistic traditions such as literature and the arts during his undergraduate degree enhanced an approach that he subsequently took in relation to sociology. In Lepenies’ framing, Victor, on the other hand, could be seen as a successor of the science roots within sociology. Whilst he did not see his social-scientific interests satisfied by a pure mathematics or statistics degree, the sociology he practised later made him feel just as much of an outsider within British sociology,

which can be described as mainly qualitative in orientation. As we can see, how my respondents' relationships with sociology unfold is also significantly influenced by the traditions of sociology that are prevalent in the country, and more specifically by the departmental cultures they find themselves in.

Finally, five of my respondents revealed not having a close relationship with sociology at all.<sup>55</sup> Their natural home, as some of them said, would have been a gender studies department or a social policy department. Others had a closer relationship to statistics and maths. Whilst they did not relate to sociology as a home in an intellectual sense, they considered working in a Sociology Department as a job opportunity that allowed them to pursue their research.

'To be honest I think it kind of in some ways represents a job opportunity. I don't really identify strongly as a sociologist, in some ways. My background is in gender and I came from an interdisciplinary gender institute, where I did all my training. And there are no jobs in gender. And there are jobs in sociology. And I think sociology is closest to what I do. And so in that sense it's a pragmatic relationship' (*Mary, 39, lecturer, 60s university*)

In 'Sociological Becomings', we analysed various ways in which my respondents became sociologists and how this had shaped their sociological imagination. My respondents had identified an early interest in the subject and their experiences of marginalisation as the main motivation to pursue sociology professionally. Depending on how they became interested in sociology, their routes into sociology were more or less linear – sometimes coming to university as a mature student, or studying other subjects before finally coming to sociology. For others, sociology

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<sup>55</sup> See Robert's, Martha's, Pauline's, Mary's and Janet's narrative in 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview'.

simply represented a job opportunity. We further analysed how their different ways of becoming sociologists and entering the field via different subjects had affected their views of sociology and their relationship with it. In the following chapters we would like to bring my respondents' framing of sociology to the forefront. In the following, we will discuss what they consider to be the key features of sociological thought and what they aspire to as sociologists.

## **6 Key Features of Sociological Thought and Sociologists' Aspirations**

The question of what is distinctive about sociological thought is a rather old and controversial one, and has occupied sociologists from the very beginnings of the discipline. Reconstructing the history of the discipline and reflecting on its purpose has the function of creating a coherent narrative for the profession. The discipline would thereby endow itself with a sense of self-consistency (Levine, 1995). In his analysis of the visions of the sociological tradition that sociologists have been conveying over the last century, Levine identified pluralist, synthetic, humanistic, contextual and dialogical narratives. In their plurality, these narratives would strengthen sociologists' feeling of disciplinary self-consistency. This means that there has always been scope for disputation and disagreement between figures in the sociological canon, even as other positions were excluded. In a similar vein, Baehr looks closer at three categories that have been important in describing the discipline's identity, and investigates how classics gain their status (Baehr, 2002). According to Baehr, a canon can be described as having been skillfully crafted over decades and then conveyed to future generations, further reinforcing its canonic status (Baehr, 2002).

Although Baehr looks into the institutional making of the founders of sociology, he neglects to discuss the fact that power relations play an important role in the crafting



of sociological discourse. What needs to be looked at is not only what has been written and who was written into the canon, but also what was silenced and redacted out of this discourse of what sociology *is* and *should be*. For the majority of the history of canonical writing and analysis of the sociological tradition, these authoritative narratives on the discipline were male, white, middle-class accounts of what sociology is, written with an underlying claim to universal validity. The question of canon and classics has been mostly challenged by feminist, black and post-colonial writers who emphasised that creators of discourses about the discipline have a major impact on who is included, written in and redacted out of it (Pullen, 1999; Delamont, 2003; Reed, 2006; Connell, 2007). These narratives give us clues about the historical embeddedness of authors, their theoretical positioning and the changes in reconstructing the discipline. Likewise, the changing framing of sociology may equally be reflected in how sociologists of a particular generation view sociology.

The analysis of my respondents' narratives on what sociology is may therefore be enriching in two ways. First of all, we will learn how current sociologists in England envision the subject. Secondly, these narratives will highlight particularly popular themes in the self-portrayal of sociology in the UK at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My respondents' views of sociology and their aims as sociologists may therefore give us clues about the intertwining of historical, political, economic and social factors in the production of a discipline and its inhabitants. Notwithstanding the diversity of my respondents' views, several key features in their description of the discipline and their own aspirations as sociologists could be identified. These

themes will be discussed in the following chapters: the loose boundaries between sociology and its others, the idea of synthesis, sociology's focus on the social and, finally, sociology's being centered around critique as a core method of analysis as well as an objective of sociological work.

## **6.1     *Sociology and its Others***

'You will find when you come to do your interviews, there is a lot of disagreement on to what sociology constitutes. It is difficult to have sociologists working together on a particular project when we can't even agree on what sociology is and should be.' (*Paul, 33, post-doctoral fellow, 60s university*)

Paul's comments demonstrate that sociology's subject matter and its aims are not only contested by other disciplines, but also by sociology itself. According to Paul, sociology's diverse nature would come to the fore particularly with sociologists collaborating with each other, thereby being forced to come to a shared understanding of the realms of the discipline. Paul shows empathy for my intention to investigate current sociologists' understanding of the discipline. Paul is right; carving out what sociology is from my respondents' narratives is difficult indeed. They ascribed their problems in illustrating the nature and the scope of sociology in a clear-cut way to the diverse nature of sociology. Boundaries with other disciplines – both in its difference as well as in its similarity to them – were drawn.

'I suppose, because there are so many sociologies, in other words, there are so many different theoretical interpretations and starting points, that suggests that sociology is quite diverse and it is difficult to have one

overriding approach or understanding. And also the fact that you have so many different interests within sociology suggests that sociology is quite a diverse discipline.’ (*Fred, 36, lecturer, red-brick university*)

Whilst Fred’s statement about diversity within the discipline refers to the current specialisation in sociology (Scott, 2005b), it further indicates that sociologists seem to identify with certain schools *within* sociology rather than agreeing on an overarching definition of sociology. This points to a more fundamental feature of theoretically and methodologically diametrically-opposed ways of framing sociology that have created a demarcation in the history of the subject (Lepenies, 1988).

The disciplines my respondents referred to in illustrating sociology’s distinctive status were often indicative of the schools of thought that my respondents relate to within sociology. As such, it can be observed that respondents with a more humanistic approach to sociology show a tendency to depict sociology in relation to history, philosophy or cultural studies, whereas informants with a stronger leaning towards science and quantitative methods explain the subject matter and methodologies of sociology in relation to economics and the natural sciences.<sup>56</sup>

Illustrating how sociology differs from other disciplines, Annette takes the arts and humanities as her reference point.

‘It is not philosophy. It has that empirical dimension which I think is really important. It is not cultural studies. It has a kind of rigour to it which sometimes – not always, of course, but sometimes – you don’t get in cultural studies. It raises very interesting questions about methods, that I think sometimes are foregone in cultural studies, possibly because

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<sup>56</sup> In ‘Sociological Becomings’ we analysed key factors in the formation of different relationships to sociology.

of their focus and because of a different historical rise. So it is not philosophy, it is not cultural studies, it doesn't do historicisation. Or at its best, it doesn't.' (*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

Whilst Annette's understanding of sociology corresponds to interpretive traditions within sociology, for her sociology would have an empirical dimension that is lacking in philosophy. Furthermore, Annette's comment on the difference between sociology and cultural studies resonates with John Scott's view on sociology having been central for many other disciplines in the arts and humanities, such as cultural studies, whilst differing from them, through more rigorous methods (Scott, 2005a). As Burawoy outlined in his presidential address, sociology's aim to improve the standard of living clearly distinguishes it from the humanities and from other social sciences, such as economics (Burawoy, 2005). In drawing a demarcation with the natural sciences, Paul conceives sociology as a humanistic discipline that is 'less scientific in a positive sense'. On the other hand, it would distinguish itself from the humanities through its concern with ideas of social progress.

'In some ways, increasingly these days, it does not differ that much from other disciplines. There are obvious similarities between sociology and politics and social policy and philosophy. In my own research I became more interested in the link between these disciplines. My own research really is very interdisciplinary these days. Traditionally, I thought that sociology differed from other disciplines by virtue of the fact that it was more humanistic in orientation. That it was interested in people and that it was less scientific in a positive sense. In the sense that it had a particular function and a particular role and that was connected with improving social conditions and how we relate to one another as human beings. That's how I guess I initially thought sociology differed. And that's how I think about it to a certain extent today, still.' (*Paul, 33, post-doctoral fellow, 60s university*)

For Arthur, a senior lecturer from a red-brick university, the methodological key difference to the natural sciences would consist in sociology's core body of knowledge being almost unaltered since its beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whilst precedent knowledge had been superseded in the natural sciences.

'This is perhaps unique that you keep teaching these theories and that they haven't been superseded. When you talk about class or the role of religion we are still stuck with these three famous names. That is different in other disciplines. Maybe anthropology is similar. In political science it may be the case. But they try to advance their knowledge and if you quote papers that are too old, you are regarded as outdated. There is again a difference in academic style whereas for us it is quite acceptable to quote the old masters. Of course there are new contributions, but they won't go away. That's the big difference to the natural sciences. In biology there will not be Darwin or Haeckel. If you do history of science then you will learn about them. But for us it is sort of an entry ticket. If you don't know Marx, Durkheim and Weber, then you have a problem later or at least in several institutions.' (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

My respondents' discourse on sociology and its boundaries was mostly characterised by analogies and differences to the arts and humanities and other disciplines in the social sciences. The natural sciences, on the other hand, were mostly mentioned in order to demarcate clear boundaries, but not to point to shared traditions and interests. With few exceptions, we could mostly see a strong leaning towards interpretive traditions of sociology. This may be indicative of the more isolated status quantitatively-based sociology has within British sociology.<sup>57</sup> Besides, the fact that there is not much mention of biology and the natural sciences as constituent elements of sociology is particularly surprising for the British context of the origins

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<sup>57</sup> For an overview of my respondents' relationships with other disciplines, see 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview'.

of sociology, which had strong foundations in evolutionary theory.<sup>58</sup> Overall, it is important to speak of tendencies in how my respondents create boundaries with other disciplines. This also became evident with some sociologists' reporting on their changing ideas over the course of time.<sup>59</sup>

## **6.2    *Synthesis***

In discussing sociology's main distinctions from other disciplines, many of my respondents mentioned sociology's synthetic nature. Looking at how my respondents framed the notion of synthesis, two strong variants of synthesis emerged. First of all, taking August Comte as a reference point, there is an imperialistic 'queen of the social sciences' narrative that seeks to subordinate other disciplines. The second synthesis-narrative we could observe amongst some of my respondents emphasised openness and intellectual permeability and seems to subordinate sociology as a distinctive discipline to the requirements of interdisciplinary dialogue.

My respondent Neil will help me to illustrate the 'queen of the social sciences' narrative. According to Neil, sociology could be compared to many other disciplines in the social sciences, as it draws on knowledge from economics, politics, history and other disciplines. However, whilst sociology would take parts of the methodologies and knowledge from other disciplines, it would nevertheless take a

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<sup>58</sup> This will be discussed in more detail in 'Synthesis'.

<sup>59</sup> We will come back to this theme in 'Sociologists' Claims Revisited'.

broader perspective than all of these disciplines taken on their own. In his analysis of sociology's synthetic character, Neil mainly talks about the social sciences.

'For me, it was almost as if sociology was a way of integrating what other social sciences are doing. You have got economics, you have got political science. Sociology was a way of relating all these different aspects in society and making sense of them as a totality. So it enables us to look at political processes in the wider social and cultural context, and to look at economic processes in the wider cultural and political context. Whereas politics can often have a quite narrow institutional focus – unless, of course, it is political sociology, in which case political processes are made sense of in terms of historical and social contexts. It is a way of contextualising the insights provided by a range of disciplines. Sociology enables us to make sense of the whole package. So I guess that's how I saw it. It helps us to make sense of the economic, the political, the cultural, in a wider context, I suppose. Good history is always sociological. Good politics is always historical and sociological. You can talk about all that stuff. Which the political scientist can talk about, and the economist can talk about. But as sociologists we can take a broader view.' (Neil, 43, lecturer, former polytechnic)

Neil's understanding of synthesis can be seen as an example for the 'queen of the social sciences' narrative. This version of synthesis seeks to subordinate other disciplines. As Neil put it, sociology allows us to make sense of society in its totality, thereby providing a perspective that other disciplines would not be able to provide. The key theorist who was mentioned at this point of the conversation in order to stress sociology's synthetic nature was Auguste Comte. Comte hoped to unify all studies of humankind – including biology, history, psychology and economics – under the roof of sociology: 'Unlike the other sciences which analyze one narrow segment of life, sociology integrates all knowledge about humanity. Comte relied upon biology for his guiding social imagery and language. Sociology was to be *the* science of society; its aim was to discover the universal laws that govern the organization and evolution of humanity' (Seidman, 2008: 12).

Comte's thought was typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; he believed all human life had passed through the same distinct historical stages (theology, metaphysics, positive science) and that, if one could grasp this progress, one could prescribe the remedies for social ills. Whilst Comte is often misunderstood as a positivist in today's terms, he always saw theory and observation in their togetherness (Elias, 1970). Comte's attitude of openness with regard to other disciplines is also reflected in the professional training of early sociologists and how they viewed themselves. Having been trained in the natural sciences or the arts and humanities, sociologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century did not call themselves sociologists, but addressed religion, education, economics, law, history, psychology, ethics, philosophy and theology in their work.

Some of my respondents find themselves in good company with Weber, who was a law theoretician and historian, or with Durkheim, who had worked in education. As Hayley, a professor from a red-brick university explains, sociology's openness and its unifying character would make sociology particularly appealing to her. She describes her own work as being located at the boundaries with other disciplines.

'I think sociology is a big enough discipline to be able to hold all these tensions in a way that each of these disciplines separately really wouldn't be able to. I mean, I don't think I could sit in history so easily and say that I worked at the edges with all those other areas. So I think there is something about sociology that is open. That is that old sort of thing, that Comteian, it's the queen of the social sciences, or John Urry, sociology as a vampire, I think he had some metaphor of sociology as sort of sucking in other disciplines. But you know I think it is in sociology's nature really, or in its culture, to be open and permeable. And certainly my version of sociology is something that has very permeable boundaries. I think what I do both is and isn't sociology, proper sociology.' (Hayley, 42, professor, red-brick university)



What is implicit in Hayley's statement is that, given the different bodies of knowledge that one can find in sociology, looking into other disciplines would be part of the requirement for a sociologist. In describing her own sociology, Hayley makes a distinction between proper and improper sociology. This is related to the fact that she encountered resistance within sociology whenever she employed 'other' bodies of knowledge to investigate a sociological question. Hence, her self-perception as 'not proper' is related to the prescriptive forces she experienced within the profession.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, she still sees herself as doing proper sociology, referring to the Comteian notion of sociology. As Liz Stanley observes in her article 'Hybridic Perspectives on Othering in Sociology', where sociologists finally locate themselves in the discussion of sociology's boundaries also depends on the kind of departmental spaces they inhabited and the framing of sociology they experienced there on an everyday basis (Stanley, 2005).

Hayley's understanding of synthesis resembles the narrative of openness and intellectual permeability that we discussed based on Stephen's, Celine's and Brian's narrative in 'Sociology as Synthetic Activity'. They framed sociology as an open and permeable discipline rather than claiming imperialistic status for sociology and considering other disciplines to be subordinated to sociology. Yet, as Hayley herself mentioned Comte as a reference point, we have to analyse her narrative in slightly more detail. Hayley's narrative shows that there is a certain tendency towards selectiveness in how my respondents interpret Comte's synthesis thesis. References

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<sup>60</sup> We will come back to this theme in 'Sociology's Synthetic Character at Risk' where we will discuss the prescriptive behaviour of the discipline towards sociologists who deviate from a 'purist' understanding of what sociology is.

to Comte and sociology as the queen of the social sciences sometimes seem divorced from what we consider to be my respondents' actual understanding of sociology, and thus indicate a selective approach in referring to so-called classics and founding fathers. What she takes from Comte is the perspective of openness and synthesis with regard to specific disciplines that match her own background, rather than Comte's more imperialistic 'queen of the social sciences' model. Though deliberately simplifying the nature of speech in the course of an interview, what I would like to exemplify here is the selective approach in referring to so-called classics and founding fathers of sociology. With Hayley further mentioning John Urry and Auguste Comte in the same sentence as an exemplification of an understanding of synthetic sociology, her selective approach to Comte becomes even more apparent.

The disciplines my respondents mention as components of a synthetic sociology also seem to be related to the paradigm they feel close to. This mechanism is similar to the one observed earlier in discussing sociology's difference to other disciplines and my respondents' process of sociological becoming. For respondents who feel more indebted to an arts and humanities approach in sociology, the synthetic nature of sociology arises out of a mix of disciplines from the arts and humanities, particularly literature. George, a senior lecturer in a London University college, emphasises that sociology's synthetic character can be seen in its drawing on different bodies of knowledge. In this respect, cultural studies would be similar to sociology. Yet, in comparison to sociology, cultural studies would lack methodological rigour. In this

respect, George casts cultural studies as the inferior other, in a somewhat elitist defence of sociology.

‘Sociology is a synthetic discipline. It draws on economics, political science, history, to a lesser extent psychology, social psychology, on social geography and critical theory, particularly critical aesthetics. And it gives a lot back. Certainly in this country, for example, sociology has given history its historiography over the second half of the twentieth century. It has sensitised critical literary theory to sociocultural structures and processes...And one of the problems of cultural studies and this is where sociology’s strength appears, sociology has a clear disciplinary sense of itself. It is coherent, it is grounded effectively in a range of methods. Cultural studies has none of that. And indeed cultural studies seeks to assert autonomy but it is a synthetic discipline in the same way that sociology is, but without that strong disciplinary sense.’  
(George, 64, senior lecturer, University of London College)

With George pointing to the particularities of his institution and its interpretation of sociology, we can see that the components that are understood to create synthesis are also specific to the institutional context one finds oneself in. George works in a Sociology Department that is proud of its openness and interdisciplinarity, with a particular focus on the arts and humanities. My respondents’ approach to sociology’s synthetic character of the discipline seemed to reveal an allegiance with the arts and humanities as components of sociology’s synthetic character, while the natural sciences hardly ever served as a reference point. The fact that there is little mention of biology and the natural sciences as constituent components of sociology is particularly surprising for the British context of the origins of sociology, which had strong foundations in evolutionary theory (Fuller, 2007b). Thus, what sociologists nowadays understand as the necessary ingredients for the sociology synthesis cake, also seems to depend on their selective way of approaching the synthesis narrative. For Rose, the synthetic element of sociology needs to be reflected in our practice.

Reading widely would directly follow from the traditions of sociology. It therefore goes without saying that sociologists should read psychology, economics and, as she notes, even biology.

‘Well, I think any good sociologist is going to be reading literature from all over the social sciences, at least. I mean, probably, maybe even biological sciences given more recent developments. I, for example, read quite a lot of literature in psychology and so my papers cross over quite substantially with psychology and psychological literature and economics as well. I think there is still something quite distinct about sociology, in that it gathers together all of these different subjects. I mean it is not seen as a problem to use things from other disciplines, which I think is quite nice about it, but I think the questions we ask are somewhat different from other disciplines. There are obviously bigger, broader, more wide-ranging questions than in psychology, and I think they are more applied than many of the questions asked in economics.’  
(Rose, 29, *research fellow, old university*)

How current sociologists define sociology and how they refer to founding fathers and founding mothers not only tells us something about their conceptualisation of what sociology is, as individuals. It also affords glimpses into the community of British sociologists and their framing of sociology in this country. In reading narratives, we need to pay as much attention to the themes that are talked about as to those that are left aside. If narratives of sociology – whether in written format, such as textbooks, or in oral format, such as interviews – are taken as an indicator of what counts as sociology and what is understood as sociology, we cannot completely separate this from the history of sociology in this country. As recently pointed out by various scholars (Fuller, 2007b; Studholme, 2007), it seems that some effort has been put into *forgetting* fundamental voices in the foundations of British sociology that were previously at the forefront of a disciplinary understanding of British sociology and could be seen as equally important as a reference to sociology’s

synthetic character. While not all of my respondents are trained in sociology, their exclusion of certain traditions in sociology and their preference of others as reference points for their self-understanding may also be indicative of how the discipline as a collective constructs itself.

In my respondents' narratives on the synthetic character of sociology, biology is not considered to be part of this 'original synthesis' model anymore. While biology was initially part of the sociological package, the way Rose talks about the necessity to read biology suggests that this need would arise from the fact that we now experience the challenges of biotechnology, not because of sociology's relationship with biology. This is interesting in so far as historically, the foundation of sociology, especially by Comte and Spencer, was motivated as an endeavour to apply biological laws – namely, evolutionary theory – to the social (Fuller, 2007b). Writing in the 1960s, Philip Abrams provided a comprehensive account of the origins of British Sociology and emphasised the shaping role of social Darwinists such as Spencer, and later Galton, in founding the discipline (Abrams, 1968). Likewise, in his genesis of academic sociology in Britain, Halliday discusses the key role Spencer had in this country by seeing sociology as a synthetic discipline that takes biology as a principal reference point (Halliday, 1968).

However, looking at current historical accounts of British sociology (Halsey, 2004), the biological heritage and how it is presented do not reflect the actual significance of biology for the foundations of sociology in the UK. This becomes even more evident in current sociology textbooks, where Spencer, Hobhouse and Ginsberg are

hardly ever mentioned. This would have been more often the case fifty years ago, as Platt found out in her study of British Sociological textbooks from 1949 to 2003 (Platt, 2008). This indicates that the declining representation of the evolutionary heritage of the foundations of sociology in the UK both in sociology textbooks as well as in sociologists' self-understanding – as we can see in my respondents' narratives – may have the function of purifying sociologists' identity from features that are no longer considered politically correct, with reference to ideas of eugenics (Fuller, 2007b). Hence, the rather selective representation of British sociology in my respondents' accounts could stand for their not wishing to engage with this part of British sociology. Whilst we cannot come to any final conclusions on the basis of the material presented here, the discussion of the conceptualisation of sociology in my respondents' narratives may allow us to give further thought to the social construction of collective disciplinary identities and the interpretation of sociology's synthetic nature in its changing character.

### **6.3     *The Social***

So far, we discussed sociology's synthetic nature and its uniqueness in drawing on other disciplines, thereby providing a broader perspective. Whilst this may describe the bodies of knowledge sociology draws on, we have not yet touched upon the unique remit of sociology in its use of these different disciplines. The key concept that is considered as sociology's unique remit by most of my respondents is the social. Yet, what exactly is the social?

‘That’s quite a tricky question, in that sometimes I think that sociology is a mixture of lots of different subjects, historical, psychological. There is a link to lots of other disciplines. It has this very unique remit. But on the other hand, it’s one of the disciplines that really focusses on the social world and how the world we live in comes to be as it is.’ (*Catherine, 28, research fellow, old university*)

In essence, what my respondents see as being embodied in the notion of the ‘social’ is an imperative to understand phenomena in relation to each other rather than in separation. The social would draw on an inclusive conception of social relations that involve more than just economic relations or political relations with regard to the state, but include these alongside other social relations, of both the public and private spheres. The social can be seen on a small scale, in how small groups of people relate to each other as well as on a bigger scale, in institutions and collectives and how these spheres relate to each other. Thus, an analysis of the social would give rise to engaging with different bodies of knowledge. Sociology’s synthetic character can therefore be seen as being determined by the social as a driving analytical category. As Stanley put it, the social has to be explored synthetically (Stanley, 2005). This openness is also what makes the social such a productive term, as another respondent, Annette, a senior lecturer from a London University College, mentions.

‘I also particularly like about sociology the fact that it is addressing the social. And that is such a productive term. And it can be articulated in so many different ways. And if something like that is at the heart of sociology, it is an enormously productive term. And it is not in any way confined to individuals or groups of individuals. That’s the positive thing about sociology.’ (*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

For Elizabeth, the uniqueness of sociological analysis consists of sociology's aim to contextualise phenomena within social structures, history and biography and to see them in relation to each other. Through the link of an analysis of structures with an examination of individual features, sociology would most differ from psychology and biology.

'It wouldn't necessarily be a common perspective across the discipline, I think. But from my point of view, taking a sociological worldview involves understanding problems in terms of their social context, as always. And it does really, I think, reduce to classic definitions of what sociology is from within the sociological tradition. The idea that social phenomena can only be understood and explained in relation to other social phenomena. Some of those original distinctions that sort of distinguish sociology from other disciplines, whether biology, psychology or economics, still hold in structural terms in my view. That it does offer a distinctive way of looking at the world, in structural terms.'*(Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university)*

Hence, in different ways, my respondents describe the social as the triad of social structures, individual action and history. This reflects how the social was conceptualised by sociology's early thinkers, such as Comte, Durkheim and Simmel. What characterises the work of the classic social theorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is that in one way or another they shared the conviction that '[...] there needs to be a foundational science that is able to grasp the central characteristics of the social in all its dimensions and all its particular applications' (Scott, 2005a: 2.1). In Durkheim's work, for example, the social describes phenomena that are inter-subjective and cannot be reduced to psychological and biological facts (Scott, 2005). Whilst my respondents referred to classic social theorists, the sociologist that is most often mentioned to illustrate the sociological mode of thought is C. Wright Mills.



‘Well I think it’s interesting that you said what your project is about. Because I think for me precisely it is about that sort of C. Wright Mills thing of bringing together or drawing on sort of biographical experience, to think about social relations and social change. So I think one of the reasons that I am a sociologist is that I am fundamentally interested in sort of big sociological questions about social change. And then I am interested in those through sort of biographical experience, particularly. And it is that that makes me not an anthropologist although I have used ethnographic methods and it is that interest in theorising social change that makes me, not really a historian. And I think C. Wright Mills’ classical definition of the sociological imagination, I use it still with students because it does capture something that is very specifically sociological, about biography and history coming together. That is very meaningful to me. I mean I am not saying that’s the whole of sociology, but I think that’s the closest sort of statement in classical sociology of what I think of as sociology as I practise it.’ (Hayley, 42, *professor, red-brick university*)

The notion of the social, and in particular Mills’ ‘The Sociological Imagination’, as an epitome for what the social can be, serve as a disciplinary anchor point for many of my respondents. The popularity of the term “social,” so claims Brewer, may consist in its allowing a lot of space for different interpretations (Brewer, 2005). The almost contingent manner in which Mills’ ‘The Sociological Imagination’ in particular has been used as a reference point across all epistemological positions, makes it worth revisiting Mills’ work. Stanley observed that in current references to the social, one could often see a prevalence of biographical notions, whereas a structural dimension would be increasingly neglected. She counters that the social could be taken as a unifying device for the discipline, as long as its three dimensions of social structures, history and biography are taken equally seriously (Stanley, 2005). Morgan, on the other hand, notes that the plurality of viewings of the sociological imagination would reflect more ‘post-modern sensibilities’ and a ‘recognition of diversities’, pointing to the ‘ungendered, yet covertly masculine,

character of the text, something which is most likely to strike the modern reader turning to it for the first time' (Morgan, 1998: 648).

The social is not described as one of sociology's key features only by my respondents: the Quality Assurance for British Higher Education (QAA) recently came to similar conclusions.<sup>61</sup> It aimed to benchmark the social as one of the key features of the discipline in order to produce '[...] consensual statements of the expected knowledge and understanding that should be possessed by its practitioners and codifying the defining characteristics of degree schemes' (Scott, 2005: 2.3). As Scott observes, this endeavour has not been very successful and equally reflects the increasingly loose approach to a category that has been crucial in the development of the sociological discipline. Without providing a precise definition of the social and its actual practice, the panel came to the conclusion that the social seems to assume rhetoric status for the sociological discipline (Scott, 2005; <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/sociology.pdf>). In contrast to this gap in the empirical coverage of the social, in 'PART II: SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE – REALITIES AND TENSIONS, OR 'HOW TO SWITCH OFF ONE'S SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN THE UNIVERSITY. A COURSE IN FOUR LECTURES' and in 'PART III: Living Sociology' we will illustrate how one of

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<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting that none of my respondents referred to a notion of the social that questions the significance of the concept of society as an expression of the social in the way in that it was put forward by John Urry (Urry, 2000). John Urry's conceptualisation of the social counterposes a distinctive view of the social to sociologies that over-emphasised the societal. According to him, in a globalised world the social transcends the nation state and is imagined beyond it as a main reference point. Whilst this perspective has been gaining increasing significance in the sociological discourse in the UK and beyond over the last decade, it is not reflected within the views of my respondents. This may be related to the fact that we did not interview respondents from another department that is renowned for its post-modern position. In addition to that, it could also be argued that in explaining the distinctive nature of the discipline, my respondents were more likely to refer to more long-standing interpretations of what sociology and the social are.

sociology's key features, the social, is practised as well as compromised on various empirical dimensions.

## **6.4 Critique**

The social was identified as one of the main themes of exploration for sociologists. Yet, this still does not answer the question of the particular methods that are distinctive for the analysis of the social. Despite my respondents' varied political convictions and theoretical provenance, critical inquiry was identified as one of sociology's main features and tools of analysis. According to Stephen, sociology would distinguish itself from other disciplines in that '[...] [our] role maybe is to train a different kind of attention to the social world'. This kind of different attention could be described as critique. Lydia phrases this in a similar way.

‘So maybe the unique thing about sociology is that it is more questioning the way things are than other disciplines. It takes as its starting point the very fact that the way we live is not inevitable or the best of all possible worlds, I guess.’ (*Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university*)

Lydia's conviction of critique being a distinctive feature of sociology resonates with Liz Stanley's view. Whilst other disciplines would equally pay attention to an analysis of the social, sociology would distinguish itself from these disciplines through employing critique as its main tool of analysis (Stanley, 2005). Yet, what exactly critique signifies for my respondents, varies substantially. In the final analysis we could identify three major modes in which critique was conceptualised.

These modes correspond to long-standing traditions within sociology. First of all, critique is considered to be a means for social transformation and progress. Secondly, critique is envisioned within a humanist, interpretive tradition, yet detached from politics. Thirdly, on the level of outcomes, a critical approach makes sociology a provider of empirical evidence for policy-makers, but without taking a political stance.

In illustrating these different types, we will come back to three of our respondents whose narratives we already discussed in relation to each other in ‘Sociology as a Life-Encompassing Endeavour’ and ‘Sociology as Vocation, Work and Leisure Time’ – Neil, Carl and Rose. According to Neil, a lecturer at a post-1992 university, sociologists have a duty to think critically. He considers the attempt ‘to place oneself outside of society’, ‘to question the taken-for-granted with the power of reason’ and thereby to ‘think ourselves freer’ as distinctive features of sociological thought. Neil, who researches and teaches Critical Theory, makes a reference to the Enlightenment, which he regards as the foundation of sociology. It could be argued that Neil’s emphasis on critical inquiry derives from his affinity with the ideas of Critical Theory. Looking at Neil’s case only, it may therefore not be legitimate to deduce that the pursuit of critique and the aim for social transformation would be intrinsic to sociology. With Carl, we encounter a sociologist whose interpretation of critical inquiry as an inherently sociological mode of analysis differs from Neil’s. Carl is a senior lecturer at a red-brick university and was intellectually socialised in the 1960s. From his point of view, sociology can be characterised by its questioning of

ideologies. He notes that his distance from what he calls dogmatic beliefs is informed by, among others, Nöbert Elias' sociology of knowledge:

'In many ways, I take a stand on not taking a stand. That comes straight out of my sociology. I find it impossible to argue in any kind of dogmatic way. Sociology gives you a kind of detachment from the belief systems of the vast majority of people. They sense that I am not one of them. If I am not one of them, from their angle, I must therefore be a conservative. This is polarisation in belief systems. I am not from that camp either. That's the thing many people in sociology cannot deal with.' (*Carl, 64, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

For Carl, the true sociologist is 'embattled', and does not subscribe to one particular position: 'The more embattled you are, the truer you are to the discipline'. The fact that Carl needs to justify his position of embattlement not only outside sociology, but also within it, could signify two things. First of all, it is indicative of a lack of consensus on the concept of 'embattlement' within sociology. Secondly, it may also signify that the practice of most sociologists does not match Carl's notion of sociology and his framing of critique that equals the constant detachment from any position. Consequently, by critically referring to his colleagues, Carl observes that key principles of sociological work – critique – would often be compromised. Rather, critique would be 'carried out on behalf of groups' and could thus be labeled as 'disguised politics' rather than as an attempt to decode ideology.

Stephen, a professor from a London University College, also refers to Enlightenment ideas and their foundational significance for the discipline. He identifies thinking and re-thinking, critiquing, making and re-making arguments as the distinct features of sociology. According to him, 'questioning, thinking otherwise and being humble

about one's own knowledge' would be distinctive features of sociology that are informed by the Enlightenment:

'So I think of it as a vocation. To live with thinking, to live with doubt in a productive way. To try and address audiences. To connect with the issues of the day and to make some kind of contribution to the representation of our time and the issues that are broad, the big questions about it.' (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

According to Rose, a young research fellow from an old university, 'evidence' is the key word that would allow sociologists to make a critical contribution (*Rose, 29, research fellow, old university*). Rose thinks that sociologists should not propose critical interventions in society unless they can provide enough evidence. 'Evidence' is the keyword that explains the major difference to Carl's seemingly similar conception, at first sight, of the separation between sociology and politics. What follows from that is that sociologists would be in no way more entitled to enter the sphere of politics than other people. Hence, for slightly different reasons, both Carl's and Rose's narratives stand for an approach to sociology that distances itself from taking a political stance.

Despite my respondents' varying epistemological positions, all of them refer to the Enlightenment as a milestone in shaping their understanding of critique. The foundational significance of the Enlightenment for sociology that emerges from my respondents' narratives has been sufficiently documented (Hawthorn, 1987; Kilminster, 1998). Geoffrey Hawthorn argues that sociological thought in its current variation could not have been developed without the preceding work of key thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant and Hegel (Hawthorn, 1987). Likewise, Richard Kilminster

illustrates that eighteenth-century ideas need to be seen at the core of an understanding of how the comparatively autonomous sociological point of view came into existence (Kilminster, 1998). Critical inquiry and the attempt to question traditional assumptions about the order of the world are understood to be at the heart of this enterprise. For Wolf Lepenies, the heritage of the Enlightenment becomes apparent in the different ways in which critique unfolds in sociology and its development between the two cultures of science and literature.

Sociology emerged as the discipline of letters, trying to distinguish itself from science, philosophy and literature, whilst still drawing on them (Lepenies, 1981; 1988). Whilst some sociologists of the nineteenth century were keen on taking over the role of literature as society's critics, others were also tempted to imitate the methods of the natural sciences. For these early days, Lepenies illustrates sociology's struggle for identity as a process of negotiation between reason and feeling or, as he puts it, between Enlightenment versus Counter-Enlightenment (Lepenies, 1988). These processes of negotiation would still be manifest in current sociology and can be seen in how Carl, whom we would like to describe as a representative of the interpretive camp, and on the other hand, Rose, who can be seen within a positivist tradition, describe their understanding of critique.

My respondents' conceptualisations of critique did not only differ with regard to the means they sought to employ in the pursuit of critique and the disciplines that they considered as relevant reference points for doing that; we can also observe fundamental differences concerning the objectives that came about with

sociologists' varying conceptualisations of critical inquiry. For respondents such as Carl, who stands for an interpretive sociological approach, critical inquiry would be pursued in order to understand and describe society. However, social transformation and 'identity politics on behalf of groups', as he put it, would not be part of the agenda. Rather, for representatives of what I label the interpretive camp, sociological critique merely unfolds on a highly abstract level. For respondents such as Neil, who can be seen as a representative of a critical social theory approach, critical inquiry would be pursued in order to promote social change. Finally, for respondents such as Rose, who represents a positivist framing of sociology, sociology's task would be the provision of objective knowledge and evidence that could further be employed by political actors.

Yet, only a few of my respondents could be identified as sharing a similar research position to Rose's. In essence, as we already indicated earlier in this thesis, the stronghold of an evidence-based position that often goes hand in hand with rational-choice theory can be seen to have its hub in Nuffield College, Oxford, around leading representatives such as John Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe, 2007). Quite a few of my respondents subscribed to a position related to effecting social transformation through sociological critique. Similarly, some of my respondents could be clearly identified as interpretive in their approach to critique in sociology. Despite these general tendencies of belonging and identifying with certain forms of critique, it must be emphasised that many of my respondents' conceptualisations of what critique is and how it can be achieved within sociology were by no means clear-cut. Rather, we also encountered a lot of mixed forms, as well as features of reflexivity



concerning the potentials and limitations of sociological critique more generally.<sup>62</sup>

This became more evident when we talked about the objectives of being critical.

Previously, we looked at Neil's approach to critique and his conviction of critique lending itself to a project of social transformation. Whilst social transformation was cited as an important objective for many of my respondents, they also emphasised the importance of taking into account our own limitations. Victoria sees critique and social change in a necessary relationship to each other. She conceives critique as both an intellectual and a political project. Yet, Victoria also points to the risk of becoming too narrow-minded in one's perspective, and considers it important to be self-reflexive.

'I think I have often said that I see myself as an activist masquerading as an intellectual, in the sense that I see myself as being in a relatively privileged situation to be involved in experiences where I have the choice to draw on certain knowledge that allows me to go out and to engage with others who are trying to transform a given situation. For me, the desire came from wanting – that sounds utopian – wanting to find ways of creating or minimising inequalities, social inequalities. So I suppose I see the intellectual tool as a means by which I might be able to be a more effective activist. That activism is not just about what I go out and do, but also about actually getting others on board. [...] Without contradicting myself I think I have already made the point that I see the intellectualising, the intellectuality and politics with a small “p” as one end on a continuum. So I do not see them as being separate. Particularly if you are the kind of sociologist that I claim to be, one that wants to use insider knowledge to make a difference and to assist others in that, to bring the notion of transformation. [...] For me a possible limitation is

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62 Thinking about various forms of critique, post-modern deconstruction has to be registered as another variation. Yet, the reason why post-modern deconstruction is not labelled as a form of critique in its own right alongside the categories mentioned above, is that it could not be traced in my respondents' elaborations about sociology's key features. As there were indicators for more deconstructionist framings of critique in the later parts of some of my respondents' narratives – e.g. Annette, Paul – that will be discussed in 'Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions' and in 'Living Sociology', it could be argued that in describing sociology's key features, sociologists have a tendency of referring to features that could be referred to as more 'classic'.

where one becomes so focused and so righteous and so dogmatic in terms of one's view of the world and one's notion of the reality within which we exist, that you lose sight, perhaps, of things shifting.' (Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic)

Hence, being an academic, Victoria sees herself as in a privileged position that allows her to produce and use knowledge in order to promote social change. It is in this regard, that she ascribes activist attributes to her work as an intellectual. Similarly, for Janet, commitment to social change starts at the level of knowledge production and the paradigms that are thereby challenged. Coming from a feminist perspective, making women's lives more visible by documenting them, has been a big part of Janet's activity. Other respondents argued that the promotion of critique was not only a task of sociologists but would also touch other disciplines in the social sciences. In the social sciences, in fact, as some argued, it would be an activity that would be of concern for all academics.

'In terms of outside of that, of course within society more generally, and this is not just about being a sociologist, those same sorts of principles and values should be reflected in the nature of our engagement. And the nature of our engagement is about being reflective and is about being critical, about encouraging people to think beyond what is in front of them. I think we have a political obligation with a small "p." So I think what we are doing should be political, not party political, but it should be political. It should be about creating the means for change, creating the means for transformation. And whether that is just about being a sociologist and whether that is just about the nature of the discipline, I am not quite sure. I think I see myself more as an academic who happens to draw on the expertise of a particular subject area. And I suspect that even if I was lecturing in law, I would want to bring that consciousness, the communitarianism, I would want to bring politics, and would want to make sure that politics was part of one's embodiment and how you conduct yourself with your students, and what you share with them and how you encourage them. But also when you engage with the wider community.' (Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic)

In 'PART I: THE CALLING OF SOCIOLOGY – SOCIOLOGISTS' CLAIMS AND ASPIRATIONS' we staged three major themes. First of all, we looked at the various ways in which sociologists relate to the discipline. Secondly, as part of this, we analysed how these relationships had come into being. We described sociological becomings as the result of a complex intertwining of personal and structural circumstances and processes of socialisation into certain sociological paradigms. Finally, we explored the calling of sociology. The question at stake concerned the claims we make about our activities as sociologists and about the discipline. Despite disparate theoretical points of reference in these narratives, we found several common denominators inscribed into them that stand in close relationship to each other: the social, synthesis and critique. Reportedly, sociology is interested in the social and it aims to be critical and to challenge the taken-for-granted. These features make sociology a synthetic and intellectually permeable discipline.

## **PART II: SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE – REALITIES AND TENSIONS, OR ‘HOW TO SWITCH OFF ONE’S SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN THE UNIVERSITY. A COURSE IN FOUR LECTURES’**

We recall Gouldner saying that ‘A Reflexive Sociology is concerned with what sociologists want to do and with what, in fact, they actually do in the world’ (Gouldner, 1970: 489). In the following, we will therefore examine how my respondents’ sociological practice compares to the claims they made earlier about the discipline and their activities. What we identified as key features of sociological thought – synthesis, the social and critique – will be subjected to a thorough test. In the first chapter we will discuss social theory as sociological practice. As part of this analysis, we will illustrate how the social as an analytical key category in sociology becomes frequently compromised. Thereafter, in ‘Sociological Practice in its Institutional Framing’ we will analyse the political economies that frame sociologists’ work in universities. This encompasses an analysis of the RAE with an emphasis on research and publications and the deplorable downfall of teaching, and how this may vitiate sociologists’ initial disciplinary aspirations. We will then demonstrate sociologists’ dilemmas in practising sociology in a synthetic way, and their facing the prescriptive nature of the discipline within the current political economies of research and publishing. This will be followed by a section that is devoted to a discussion of how sociologists’ claims of contributing to critique and

public discourse are practised and compromised. Finally, we will raise the question of what is left of sociologists' aspirations and the discipline's aims in being critical, analysing the social and being a synthetic discipline.

## **7 Social Theory as Sociological Practice**

For Gouldner, social theory is the first form of sociological practice. It is an intrinsic expression of the infrastructure, the belief systems and the conditions out of which it arose (Gouldner, 1970). Discussing the discrepancies between sociologists' claims and their practices, we recognise that social theory is a mode of sociological practice itself. Gouldner suggests that the history of social theory is an intellectual genre that comprises at least three parts – history, sociology, and criticism. The most important role the historian of social theory plays within that is that of *critic* (Chriss, 1999: 1). Bringing Gouldner's work to the point, Chriss argues that 'reflexive social theorists can help persons see and understand the connection between interests, desires, social location, and material groundedness (the 'infrastructural' side or 'silent subtext' of a theory or belief system) on the one hand, and information, claims, reports, and news (the 'technical' or 'textual' side), on the other' (Chriss, 1999: 14).

In the course of the interview, I asked my respondents about their relationship with social theory. The narratives that are presented here do help us in demonstrating how social theory can be dissonant with what we earlier identified as sociology's major

principles. The voices that are represented here – Brian, Janet, Lydia, Hayley, Victoria, Barbara and Martin – are voices of critique that will assist me in taking on this role of critic within social theory that Chriss described in reference to Gouldner. My protagonists will bring forward their most pressing concerns, focusing on the element of the social and how it is practised and compromised in social theory.<sup>63</sup>

## **7.1 *Practising Social Theory: The Exclusion of Gender, Race and Post-Colonialism***

In this chapter, some of my respondents will be preoccupied with a dimension, in that the analysis of the social has not been done justice to in a long-standing way up to our days: claims for universal validity for what often is a partial standpoint. However, it is due to my critics' otherness by being female, non-white and/or non-European that they question many of the foundations on which social theory is often built. Gouldner views this phenomenon of otherness and its intellectual consequences as follows: '[...] when a theory resting on one infrastructure, one specific set of sentiments, domain assumptions, and personal reality – is encountered by those whose *own* infrastructure is quite different, the theory is experienced as manifestly unconvincing' (Gouldner, 1970: 398). In the following, some of my respondents will shed light on social theory's fading-out of gender and its disregard

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<sup>63</sup> As we will discuss in more detail in 'PART III: Living Sociology', their own work can be regarded as a critical response to this hegemonic way of viewing the world as it is (still) practised in a lot of social theory texts.

of historical and cultural places and times as determining variables of social theory.<sup>64</sup>

The unifying roof for our discussion is my reflexive protagonists' bringing forward of the argument that a lot of social theory is written on the premise of universal validity. The perspectives from which the world is mostly described are thereby reduced to a single standpoint: male, white, middle-class, European. These universalist claims go back to sociology's foundations in the Enlightenment. Critical inquiry and the belief in knowledge were brought forward as the promises of the Enlightenment (Hawthorn, 1987; Kilminster, 1998). Replacing religion, knowledge was considered the key to the world, perceived as objective and universally valid. Yet, the streamlined perception of the social world as conveyed in large parts of social theory seems to be inconsistent with the experience of actors that find themselves outside of what is understood to be a universal experience.

Historically, knowledge production has been a highly gendered process; one that has championed the role of rational man as the objective knower and consistently excluded women, both as critical subjects and as independent producers of knowledge. Feminism considers the failure of the Enlightenment to live up its own promise as an emancipatory project as one of its biggest shortcomings. At the center of feminist critique is the pretension that knowledge produced by a male and white rational subject claims to have objective status and universal validity (Harding,

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<sup>64</sup> Within the realms of this thesis, we can only discuss how gender and the global south are not paid sufficient attention to in social theory. Yet, these are by no means all the dimensions on which social theory compromises its own promises. Other equally important aspects are race and ethnicity, social class and sexuality.

1990). Feminist sociology has therefore been at the forefront of critiquing universalism in sociology (Smith, 1974; Lovell, 1990; Pullen, 1999; Delamont, 2003). Echoing fundamental feminist epistemic principles, Janet points to the fact that her own background – her experience as a woman and her working within a feminist and queer-studies framework – led her to embody difference as a key analytical category in investigating the world. In her statement, Janet summarises what she considers to be a key problem in social theory.

‘I work within a feminist post-structuralist framework. The starting point to that is that gender inequality exists and is a bad thing. And not just across gender – ethnicity, sexuality, age, class. Those are all important considerations. I would say that a difference I have noticed between myself and the sort of eminent, white British male sociology scholars is that they tend to speak in very universalist terms. These very overarching theories. For me, coming from this background where you are constantly aware of difference, it makes it more difficult to produce overarching theories.’ (*Janet, 31, research fellow, 60s university*)

Janet accuses her fellow scholars of not integrating gender into their work. Rather, they would refer to the world in universalist terms, even though the experience of women largely differs from this. Essentially, this different kind of experience and the knowledge that arises from it is what sets feminists in opposition to social theory that claims universal validity. As Elaine Pullen puts it, ‘through women’s narratives, which speak of a world at odds with the representations of social science, the founding assumptions of sociological theory and practice become apparent’ (Pullen, 1999: 41).

‘I would also like to see those old white men who are still producing these enormously influential books to incorporate notions of difference a bit more in their work. It is absolutely inexcusable that they still make



these absurd statements that are so profoundly gendered and they are so unaware of that. It is unacceptable at this day and age. So maybe the first goal is about incorporating notions of difference, more and more all the time. And it has already had a huge impact on the discipline and doing that more and more and seeing that represented in who is doing sociology. It is a much more attainable goal. And I think that is absolutely disgraceful and completely unacceptable. But they still keep doing it. It will be interesting to see a newer generation of scholars, whether that particular hierarchy will be reproduced. It will to a certain degree, but enormous inroads have been made.' (*Janet, 31, research fellow, 60s university*)

Janet's accusation could have referred to another one of my respondents, who could be labelled as a representative of the kind of people Janet is talking about. According to Carl, a senior lecturer in a red-brick university, sociology that acts on behalf of a particular group, as he puts it, misses its task. Rather, in order to do sociology 'properly' and to live critique, we would have to stay 'embattled'.

'I think we have a particular task but that task does not always appear in a pure form. A lot of sociology is pretty low-level, metaphysical, individualistic. Much of it has no consciousness of its presuppositions. The problem is that sociology properly done could provide extraordinary insights. But the kind of sociology that would give you that kind of vivid insights, there is not much of it around. Much of sociology is either disguised politics or metaphysics. 90 per cent of sociology is disguised politics. They are acting on behalf of some group, on disabled people, on women. The answer to your question is that there is a task of sociology but it is not anywhere near fulfilled.' (*Carl, 64, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

Whilst some of my respondent's narratives pointed into a similar direction, only a handful of respondents made equally explicit comments. As Janet stated, feminist sociologists have been successful in unmasking some of the epistemological concepts that have traditionally been seen as 'neutral' knowledge claims, as representing only the vested power interests of elite white men. Pointing to the close

interaction between feminist sociology and sociology, Elaine Pullen emphasises in her study on the transformation of sociology by gender studies in the UK that feminism radically transformed sociology (Pullen, 1999). Whilst Pullen appreciates that gender has left its traces in textbook writing, research and course curricula, the ‘challenges to the traditional theoretical and methodological bases of the discipline have met the greatest opposition or inertia’ (Pullen, 1999: 63). The fact that gender studies is still an exclusive field and hardly ever taught within a social theory course apart from an extra gender session or a specialist gender option further supports the thesis of feminist sociology and gender studies having the status of a specialism within sociology rather than being part of the core canon (Abbott and Wallace, 1997).

With regard to the relationship between feminism and sociology, Pullen further notes that we can only fully grasp ‘processes of intellectual innovation and transformation’ if we understood that ‘political, institutional and intellectual contexts of change are accompanied by an exploration of the social relations of academic production’ (Pullen, 1999: 2).<sup>65</sup> Pullen’s work therefore seems to reiterate Gouldner’s arguments on the inextricable link between theory and economic relations.<sup>66</sup> As Stanley further notes, ‘Gouldner also saw theorising, the commonplace of the discipline, being technologised as ‘Theory’ and as a specialist apparatus owned by the few on the commanding heights. In doing so, he commented

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<sup>65</sup> We will come back to this important intertwining of the production of knowledge and the social relations of academic knowledge production in ‘Sociological Practice in its Institutional Framing’.

<sup>66</sup> The fact that Elaine Pullen’s PhD thesis was never published – for health reasons she is no longer working within the academic sector – shall nevertheless not depreciate the significant contribution she has made, documenting the transformation of sociology through feminist sociology and gender studies in the UK.

on the institutionalizing of sociology and theory within the university, and on the move to sell 'knowledge products' for purposes including the gaining of prestige and power within the discipline' (Stanley, 2000: 62). Likewise, Victoria's observations on what counts as legitimate theory and research within sociology reflect these thoughts.

'The discipline, the subject, there is the feeling, the view that aspects of that, that is considered to be worthy, that is legitimate, that are highly esteemed, tend to be those areas that are more theoretically based. And a particular type of theory and theoretical perspective and approach and I think reflected in that is also a number of strands that it is those domains of sociology that are still heavily male-dominated and male-preserved, although the exception of some eminent thinkers in that area, Stuart Hall, although he did not start off as one, which is interesting, they didn't start off as sociologists. I think there is still the hierarchy and what legitimate sociology is and that is what theoreticians do.' (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

These different hierarchies within social theory are further perpetuated in the writing of sociology textbooks. In a powerful way, the consistent ignorance of major insights into gender in sociology by sociology textbook writers, as referred to above by Janet, shows that disregarding gender as a major analytical category also represents a violation of sociologists' principles of being open to 'new' insights and integrating them. Speaking with Gouldner, one of the reasons for current sociologists' persistent fading-out of gender in social theory could be seen in the potential clash with what Gouldner phrased as their domain assumptions (Gouldner, 1970: 32). As already discussed in more detail in 'Theorising the Link between Social Theory, the Sociological Calling and Sociological Practice', for Gouldner domain assumptions 'are intellectually consequential' and 'theory-shaping' but *not* because they 'rest on evidence nor even because they are provable' (Gouldner, 1970:

35). Rather, every social theory would be a personal theory as well as a tacit theory of politics. Hence, as the integration of gender as an underpinning analytical category would threaten the domain assumptions of a lot of social theorists, gender is mostly still left at the doorstep of social theorising.

The impact of feminist sociology on mainstream sociology can also be seen in the fact that feminist critiques 'of sociology as a discipline have been taken up by male sociologists – especially those who take post-modernist positions and those developing 'male studies' and expounded as if men were the originators of them' (Abbott and Wallace, 1997: 19). Lydia further illustrates the phenomenon of sociological ideas on difference only gaining recognition once they are thought of and practised by men.

'Basically, that if you are labelled a feminist then you are not as widely taken up as elsewhere. Or to put it in another way, the issues don't exist until men study them. Which is quite a sweeping statement, I think. I do acknowledge that. But there is an element within that which is true. And I think that's all I can think about to say, about gender.' (*Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university*)

Whilst the exclusion of gender from social theory seems to be the dimension to which most attention has been devoted with regard to the accusation of social theory being produced under the pretense of universality, other dimensions also did not receive the attention they deserve (Reed, 2006). The following statement of one of my respondents who is researching minority groups encapsulates the critique against universalist assumptions in a lot of social theory.

‘You find that in sociology as well, particularly in the study of identity and gay and lesbian populations, this whole emphasis on choice and self invention. Wherever I teach, I am constantly aware of the fact that this kind of material is lacking. It is lacking because this kind of material is based on the experiences of the majority of the society. But that does not reflect the experience of society as a whole. So in my study on lesbian and gay populations and X, a lot of these processes of de-traditionalisation and self-invention, the ideological underpinnings become very apparent in the study of cultural minorities and in my own experiences.’ (*Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic*)

What Brian expresses in this quote is that he cannot use a lot of social theory for his research, as this material is based on the experience of the majority of society. Brian’s quote encapsulates the tensions in social theory in excluding or separating three dimensions that are always present in a strong interplay – gender, race and the euro-centricity of social theory. Yet, as Brian points out, it is equally important not to essentialise any of these categories as new foundationalist categories. This resonates with Steven Seidman’s work on the end of sociological theory (Seidman, 1991). Seidman declares grand theories, and more generally sociological theories that try to explain a universalist logic of society, as obsolete. Yet, whilst he promotes difference, he argues that we must be careful not to essentialise gender or race as new foundationalist categories (Seidman, 1991).

Connell recently proposed a new path for social theory that recognises the locatedness of social theory in its crafting in a much stronger way. Rather than understanding the world as it is framed by mainstream social science and the educated and wealthy in Europe and North America, Connell outlines that a global sociological imagination has to go beyond the imagination of the global North that dominates what sociology is (Connell, 2007). In this context, Brian, who did his first

degrees in Asia, reports on his educational experience of being confronted with the sociological imagination of the global North – European social theory. Yet, it presented a process of secularisation that did not seem to match the realities of life that Brian, his fellow students and his sociology professor had observed in the country.

‘I will never forget this wonderful, wonderful professor of mine, she said something that was so profound, I will never forget. She said it in 1984 during my first year at university. She was doing the theory of secularisation: ‘If you do sociology of religion, you have no choice. You have to do it. Despite the fact that you do it in a very different cultural and historical context. But that context doesn’t count. You have to do it because the textbook says that you have to do it. Which assumes that modernisation brings about secularization and the kind of institutionalised religion.’ But if you apply that to X, religion was still playing such an important role in the lives of people. And even today. This professor, she had to teach it, all this theory as it was. At the end she was shaking her head and she said, I wish all these bloody theorists had looked beyond Britain! Because if they had, they would not have come up with a theory like that.’ *(Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic)*

The Western theories of religion to which Brian was introduced in no way corresponded to the reality of the society he found himself in at the time. Having been located in a completely different socio-political context, he thus experienced the limitations of a body of knowledge that claimed to be universally valid.<sup>67</sup> This also alludes to the more general theme of sociologists writing and working under the assumption that social theory is universally valid and spaceless. Yet, to be more precise, the underlying assumption of a lot of social theory still is that what counts as universal is in fact eurocentric.

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<sup>67</sup> Other respondents, such as Victoria or Celine, share this viewpoint. For further reference, see ‘Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview’.

‘I was so aware of the cultural and social disjunction between the knowledge that we have to study, because it is hegemonic knowledge that we have to study, it applies to all areas of sociology, but it is actually taken from a very situated, contextualised place.’ (*Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic*)

This fundamental mismatching between how concepts such as religion manifested themselves in his country and how they were reflected in imported, western theory sharpened his sensitivity and skepticism towards social theory. Coming from a former colony, he experienced theory as a western creation that failed to take into account developments outside the western hemisphere. Brian further describes his memories of his sociological socialisation into Western theories, studying in Asia.

‘When we had to do Marx, Durkheim, Weber, I am not saying that they were talking rubbish, but I kept asking myself the question this is what Marx said about whatever, but how does that relate to us? I kept asking that question. You know when I studied Weber, the iron cage and rationalisation, I wonder how that would affect my country? Because at that time we were industrialising. The reflection was different because as a historical being I was in a different space and yet using the same body of knowledge. Because I was so constantly aware of the situatedness and the constructedness and the contextualised nature of knowledge. [...] But it is only in recent years that sociologists of religion are aware that the theory of secularization perhaps only applies to limited geographical areas. [...] But why did it take such a long time to realise that what is true for this culture, however valid it is, might not be true for other cultures? [...] What is true for the west in terms of its lived experience, will eventually become true for the experiences of other human beings. It is a very colonial way of seeing the world, of organising cultures in terms of tradition. They will all move towards a climax, represented by Western culture.’ (*Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic*)

Similarly to Connell, Gurminder Bhambra elaborates on the fact that social theory needs to be interpreted in the context of its making (Bhambra, 2007). More specifically, Bhambra makes an argument for a post-colonial revolution within sociology, pointing to the need for sociologists to re-think sociology, and in

particular social theory, in the light of post-colonialism. Bhambra has criticised sociology for its lack of recognition that most of its theory was written under the pretense of euro-centricity. The European perspective could not only be traced in the whiteness and maleness of its producers, but also in the historical perspective and the narrative on the shaping features of European history (Bhambra, 2007). As Bhambra outlines, the context within which, for instance, the Industrial Revolution and its consequences are theorised is a context that does not take into account the political developments of colonialism that were the basis on which the Industrial Revolution could happen. As such, as Bhambra concludes, social theory needs to reinscribe the missing link of post-colonialism. Sociology that does not take into consideration how colonialism shaped European history and thus the production of social theory, does not show an awareness of its own making. Hence, inscribing post-colonialism into sociology, as ‘another missing revolution’, as Bhambra puts it, means to do justice to the conditions out of which sociology arose (Bhambra, 2007).

## **7.2     *Practising Social Theory: The Selective Interpretation of the Social***

In ‘Sociology’s unique remit – the social’, I presented Catherine’s, Annette’s, Elizabeth’s and Hayley’s conceptions of the social. They understood the social as an imperative to frame phenomena in society in relation to each other rather than in separation, connecting biographical, structural and historical aspects. In the previous chapter, my respondents discussed how they see one of sociology’s key features – the social – compromised in social theory, excluding gender, race and post-



colonialism as analytical categories that underpin social theory. Subsequently, feminist theory, post-colonialism and postmodern theory more generally were discussed as having contributed to contesting a longstanding worldview of universalism in social theory.

In this chapter, my respondents will go one step further. Whilst some of my respondents had observed that these critical theoretical approaches had enabled sociology to express the social in a far more comprehensive way, countering universalism, several of my respondents observed that the element of the social as one of sociology's key features seems to be again at risk to be interpreted in a selective manner. To be precise, they criticised that the structural and historical dimension in analysing the social would not be appropriately reflected in a lot of social theory. Post-modern theory was mentioned as the most common target of critique without my respondents' specifying particular streams or authors. Being occupied with issues of education, race and ethnicity, Victoria thinks that an understanding of the structural dimensions of social life would be a necessity in explaining current processes. However, according to her, a lot of current social theory that overemphasises the role of the individual would leave the impression of talking to itself rather than to the world outside. According to Victoria, these developments would point to sociology becoming rather self-indulgent.

'But in this instance what it is that I have found difficult – maybe I should refer to some of the sociological frameworks of the last twenty or thirty years. Personally in what I am trying to achieve in my own writing, I have found them somewhat unhelpful. I suppose you get fashions and fads in disciplines in terms of theoretical frameworks. But what I have found is that perhaps some of these sociological frameworks – that is about theoreticians talking to themselves rather than providing ways in which we can talk to ourselves and others out there. That is

unhelpful in my area. And I am thinking about theory that has been preoccupied and seemed to be by default driven by absurd notions of individualism, I have found that frustrating. For me, who is not a theoretician but indeed uses theory to make sense of the empirical work that I do, I have found some of the post-modern stuff not only esoteric but also extremely unhelpful. Unhelpful in the sense that if one believed that sociology as a discipline should be there to give us some pointers and some take on social life, there is a sense in which I think some of these theorists have forgotten about the social out there! I think I am not a reconstructed Marxist, I am not. But you know I do strongly believe that our social situations account for a lot and do shape what it is we can do as individuals. [...] But going back to the point, I think some of the sociology of the last twenty years has had this preoccupation perhaps in glorifying theories that are more concerned with individuals, individual peculiarity rather than assisting us in getting a more nuanced understanding of how the situational interfaces with agency and the individual.’ (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

Focussing on the absence of a sense of enduring social structures and material inequalities in what Victoria loosely calls ‘post-modern theory’, she criticises the more specific limitations of the way the social is addressed, yet without naming a specific theorist. Victoria further remarks that current social theory would often linguistically disguise social phenomena – talking about social exclusion rather than about poverty – and therefore not enable us to understand social realities. Brian makes similar observations.

‘I would also like to see the gap between theory and practice narrow. Within lesbian and gay studies, there is too much linguistic playfulness. Too little about what we can actually say to the people out there. I want to see more of that. To make our knowledge much more useful. I am not saying therefore that we don’t do theory. Theory is important. But theory that is situated, that is contextualised. Theory that is so aware of its own underpinnings and constructedness. Beyond the boundary of the discipline.’ (*Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic*)

For Brian, who works within gay and lesbian studies, post-modern theory has enabled us to move away from a universalised understanding of what the social

world is. However, he thinks that this necessary element of differentiation must not result in a complete neglect of the shaping forces of material structures in our analysis. Striking a similar chord, Barbara acknowledges the benefits of post-modernity but also elaborates on what she sees as backdrops. Despite difference and cultural variation, she thinks that sociologists should nevertheless be united around sociology's initial goals of social progress.

'It's all so fragmented by all this kind of identity stuff that has come up in recent years. I have got some ideas myself of pursuing certain projects. About unifying sociologists around progressive goals. I like the idea of sociology as being committed to our communalities, rather than our differences. There are basic human needs. Of course to acknowledge cultural and historical variations, of course to acknowledge that, but not to be so far down that road that it's hard to get back. One can get lost in it all. So greater cohesion, I think, would be nice. A greater sense of solidarity, perhaps.' (*Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic*)

Barbara's comments also resonate with those of other observers: Rojek and Turner label sociology as increasingly decorative and detached from an analysis of material conditions and reality (Rojek and Turner, 2000). With regard to the sociology of work, Strangleman criticises the replacement of an analysis of economic structures by an analysis of consumption and identity: 'Here, work and the study of work identity, is a marginal pursuit. Where the 'economic' is the focus of investigation it is in terms of consumption rather than production' (Strangleman, 2005a: paragraph 5.) This would reflect the view that economic structures and work in capitalist societies that were once seen as the common ground for an understanding of social phenomena are now merely regarded as one out of many features that shape people's lives, their 'identities', rather than as a key analytical category that underpins social life.

To conclude, as my respondents have criticised before, a prioritisation of an individualised perspective would put a comprehensive analysis of the social at risk, thereby neglecting the dimensions of socioeconomic structures and history. In a similar way, other respondents observed how this phenomenon in social theory is reflected in social research. According to Martin, sociological research would increasingly move away from real world issues. The rise of post-modernity would be reflected in research topics that center round cultural analysis, while he sees an engagement with political structures as declining.

‘My initial interest in sociology was in the sociology of education. How can we organise education that can really give opportunities to everyone? There are tremendous barriers. And that really got reinforced in 1979. When Mrs. Thatcher was elected it was really important for sociology to attempt to understand what she was doing, how she was restructuring Britain, what impact her policy had on the welfare state. We needed to monitor what was going on. To investigate social issues I suppose, which is a classic concern. But I think in Britain sociology has drifted away from that. You find it in departments other than Sociology Departments. You find it in health departments, but if you looked at Sociology Departments, it is all about culture, the more symbolic research concerns. It is more theoretical and informed by a kind of research that is not anecdotal but it is an analysis of cultural objects, you know, McDonald’s and Disney, branding, it is empirical.’ (*Martin, 60, lecturer, 60s and old university*)

British sociology appears to have drifted away from this task of investigating the social. What he means with this is a structural investigation of the social. According to him, the places that would now carry out this task and take it more seriously than Sociology Departments are social policy departments. What he considers as ‘the real sociology’ would now be produced elsewhere. Yet, Martin did not mention here what was indicated by other respondents. Whilst one could observe an intensified

pursuit of certain research topics that were a response to the Thatcher regime in a critical way as Martin mentioned, the Thatcher era had left its long-term traces on sociology, in that parts of sociology that tended to be particularly critical out of the nature of their inquiry – such as the sociology of work – were given increasingly less space in Sociology Departments and were relocated to business schools.<sup>68</sup>

Whilst respondents like Martin, Victoria and Brian deplored an increasingly selective interpretation of the social in sociology, with a leaning towards the individual at the cost of a materialist analysis, none of my respondents explicitly mentioned the questioning of the social as a category, and the questioning of the existence of society as a whole, within British sociology as giving far more reason for concern. In relation to Martin's comments on Thatcher, it is interesting to see that some trends within British social theory seem to replicate this anti-society momentum of the Thatcher era. Most prominently, John Urry suggested a new sociology that would no longer be in need of the concept of society (Urry, 2000). Rather, within a globalised world, the social would manifest itself in much more diverse and mobile ways within which taking the nation-state as a basic concept would no longer make sense. William Outhwaite stated that these kinds of movements within social theory could be considered as anti-political and as replicating a neoliberal agenda (Outhwaite, 2006).

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<sup>68</sup> Colin Crouch notes that whilst a diaspora in other departments can be a fruitful experience, what happens is that ultimately parts of the discipline are not reproduced any longer within Sociology Departments, where the next generation that teaches sociology is trained (Crouch, 2005). These are very important themes that cannot be followed up in further detail within this thesis but that require thorough analysis in the future.

All in all, respondents with a leaning towards a materialist position were more likely to express concerns about sociology's increasingly selective interpretation of the social with a detachment from an analysis of social structures and material realities. Whilst the topics they work on can be seen as rather diverse, themes of social inequality and social change were amply present amongst these respondents.<sup>69</sup> What further became evident with these respondents was that cultural studies were almost categorically blamed for sociology's diminishing or changing focus on the social. This could be seen in Martin's narrative and his derogative perception of cultural studies 'merely' dealing with cultural objects rather than providing what he considered to be a more 'thorough' analysis of empirical reality. Liz Stanley criticises this premature prejudice against cultural studies and is keen on drawing a distinction between critiquing current sociology on the one hand and prematurely scapegoating post-modernity and particularly feminism for the 'balkanisation' of sociology (Stanley, 2000: 59).

Another indicator of the decreasing importance of structure in social theory and the loss of the social could be seen in the rising popularity of psychoanalysis amongst sociologists.<sup>70</sup> My respondent Barbara observes that the most recent leaning of sociologists towards psychoanalysis could be seen as a defeat of sociology's aim to be radical, to address the collective and to intervene politically.

'Having said that, there is a dearth of the political out there [...] with the decline of the left. And that doesn't seem to be, I don't know, on the one

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<sup>69</sup> See 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview' for further information.

<sup>70</sup> Whilst quite a few of my respondents referred to psychoanalysis – see 'Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview' – they did not specify the type of psychoanalysis that would partly inform their work.

hand – as you can tell already, I am very ambivalent towards a lot of things, because with the decline of that left-wing political agenda, sociology seems to me less and less exciting. And that might be a by-product of getting older, which would be a depressing acknowledgement; it might be to do with, you know, becoming increasingly aware of my own limitations as well as the limitations of others. Becoming more aware of the role of the unconscious. Even as I say that, all the time, I think, perhaps you are finding this in your interviews, there are two levels of consciousness going on. So even while I am speaking about this, I am also thinking critically, oh yes but psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, that really has become popular in recent years as a consequence of the decline of the left and the disenchantment of the left and so on, as an alternative search for meaning. It is a strange kind of position to occupy because there is this duality all the time between feeling one thing and then standing out in an almost dissociated way and critiquing it, or trying to critique it.’  
(Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic)

In this quote, Barbara’s ambivalent position towards psychoanalysis becomes apparent. Whilst Barbara had initially argued against the rise of identity politics in sociology, she explains that her own sympathies for psychoanalysis may be a byproduct of changing aspirations and of getting older. Barbara’s sympathies for psychology and psychoanalysis and her ambivalence are not an isolated phenomenon. As other observers have noted, psychoanalysis seems to experience increasing presence within British sociology (Clarke, 2006). Partly, some of my respondents saw their turning to more psychological approaches as an outcome of revising their earlier aspirations of contributing to social change.<sup>71</sup> Stevi Jackson notes that social theory that puts emphasis on the individual, the current political atmosphere of cocooning the public from politics and sociologists’ increasing fascination by these approaches have to be seen in conjunction with each other. However, as Jackson further elaborates, this phenomenon cannot be seen to be confined to social theory with a focus on the individual only.

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<sup>71</sup> This theme will be discussed in more detail in ‘Sociologists’ Claims Revisited’.

What would give far more reason for concern is that the increasing fading-out of social phenomena can now be observed in social theories that had initially criticised mainstream sociology and had shown a strong interest in social progress and critique. Jackson focuses her discussion on parts of feminist sociology and puts forward the argument that ‘the cultural turn’ is partly to blame for feminist sociology having lost its critical edge and a shift from a focus on ‘things’ – such as housework, inequalities in the labour market or male violence – to ‘words’, to an emphasis on language, representations and subjectivity’ (Jackson, 1999: 2.4). Whilst Jackson concedes that there have been gains from ‘the cultural turn’ and the rise of postmodernity, an understanding of the material underpinnings of inequalities in society has been lost. For feminist sociology that once brought back the political momentum into sociology and contributed to its own reflexive transformation, Jackson observes that ‘the reliance on psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity limit[s] agency to those unruly aspects of the unconscious which have escaped the forces of repression’ (Jackson, 1999: 7.3). Barbara indicates that the decline of politically-enthused theory and the decreasing number of sociologists writing and employing it also means that sociologists themselves have become less politicised as a group.

This can be taken as an indication of how sociologists compromise their own aspirations with regard to critical inquiry. Like Jackson, Craig Calhoun finds equally harsh words for this phenomenon: ‘But the puzzle lies not just in invocations of strong collective identity claims. They lie also in the extent to which people (and not



only in the West) are not moved by any strong claims of identity – or communality – with others and respond instead to individualistic appeals to self-realization. Moreover, these two are not altogether mutually exclusive in practice. The same unwillingness to work in complex struggles for social transformation may lie behind both a preference for individualistic, psychologistic solutions to problems and a tendency to accept the illusory solutions offered by strong, simplistic identity claims on behalf of nations, races and other putatively undifferentiated categories (Calhoun, 1994: 29). This is what we described as the turning away from the social in this chapter. However, the fact that social theory gets more apolitical and that more sociologists seem to be drawn towards social theories that emphasise the significance of the individual – in particular psychology and psychoanalysis – at the cost of the role of theoretical frameworks that focus on system and structure as explanatory variables, needs to be revisited in more detail.

In this chapter my respondents discussed the selectivity with that social theory partly analyses the social. In the first part of this chapter, we outlined the exclusion of gender and post-colonialism from social theory and its critique based on my respondents' narratives. Post-modern theory, feminism and post-colonial theory were discussed as having challenged universalist assumptions in social theory and as having contributed to a more comprehensive practice of the social in social theory. In the second part of the chapter, my respondents diagnosed another dimension in a selective approach to the social in social theory. Parts of post-modern theory, in particular cultural studies, were blamed for a very selective approach to the social and a detachment from an analysis of material structures. This could be seen in a

declining significance that is given to social structures in social theory, whilst an increasing emphasis on individualised views and identities prevails.

## **8 Sociological Practice in its Institutional Framing**

For Gouldner, being critical cannot be restricted to a theoretical claim, but needs to be fulfilled in practice, inside and outside the university: ‘The core of a Reflexive Sociology then is the attitude it fosters toward those parts of the social world closest to the sociologist – his own university, his own profession and its associations, his professional role, and importantly, his students and himself – rather than toward only the remote parts of his social surround. A Reflexive Sociology is distinguished by its refusal to segregate the intimate or personal from the public and collective, or the everyday life from the occasional ‘political’ act. It rejects the old-style closed-office politics no less than the old-style public politics. A Reflexive Sociology is not a bundle of technical skills; it is a conception of how to live and a total praxis’ (Gouldner, 1970: 504). In the following, we would therefore like to analyse how sociologists practise their subject in academia.

Whilst in the previous chapter social theory was discussed as an example of sociological practice, thereby already briefly touching upon the shaping forces of institutional frameworks, we have not yet systematically shed light on the social and economic underpinnings of sociological practice in the UK. In the following sections, we will explore some key features of the political economies of UK Higher Education in their framing of sociological practice. Centering around the relationship between research and teaching, we will discuss the prioritisation of

research over and above teaching in academia as an outcome of the RAE. In this context we will analyse how the critical calling of the discipline is challenged by the ways in which sociological practice is institutionally framed by the current political economies of the RAE.

### **8.1     *The Institutional Framing of Sociological Practice***

What is it like to be a sociologist in the UK? Asked for their work processes as sociologists, almost unanimously, my respondents listed their activities as the following:

‘Teaching, doing research, doing lots of administrative work, reviewing, journal articles, book proposals, going to conferences, writing conference papers and meeting people there. I am a member of a professional academic association. So you get meetings with this group. These are the main tasks I can think of – trying to get research funding, trying to get your research done in your free time if you don’t have people who work with you or for you. Admin is really something that is taking over if you are in modern universities or in universities in the UK. The whole exam board business is taking up a lot of time. We are doing a high level of customer service in that we exclude any sort of bias treatment of students. Anonymous marking, second marking of lots of work - this is all undergraduate level. We are not talking about academics. This is just the papers at undergraduate level. This takes up a lot of time. Hours of exam board discussions.’ (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

The list of activities that Arthur named is indicative of the general workload of academics in this country. This has to be seen in the context of restructuring

processes within Higher Education over the last thirty years.<sup>72</sup> While universities have been the main site of knowledge production in the modern period, scarcity of state funding, along with an increased distrust of scientific authority from a scientifically better informed public, have resulted in a more diverse landscape of knowledge producing institutions (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). In this context, scarcity of state funding forced academics to acquire additional funds from private sponsors and funding institutions and also resulted in fewer permanent posts being available and in an increase of fixed-term contracts (Shore and Wright, 2000; Hockey, 2004). Besides, the implementation of quality assurance such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has substantially altered working conditions for academics, putting stronger emphasis on research and publications (Miller, 1996), with a rising teaching workload as a result of the massification of academia from the 1960s onwards (Martin, 1999). Moreover, managerialism put a stress on administration, leaving less time for research while at the same time involving rising pressure to publish (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996; Henkel, 2000). These changes seem to constrain the autonomy of academics while simultaneously shifting responsibility to them to acquire funding and manage an increasingly onerous workload. This is reflected in Arthur's statement and the list of activities he describes as being part of his working life as a sociologist. Yet, what is at the heart of these changes was described by another respondent.

‘There is the RAE culture, most obviously. But this is a general question for academics, not simply for sociologists. And in my previous

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72 For a synopsis of the changes in the British Higher Education system in the post-war period and the effects on sociology see APPENDIX E: The British Higher Education System.

workplace that changed the intellectual culture quite a lot. And it created a great deal of competitive anxiety.' (*Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university*)

The Research Assessment Exercise is a performance measure instrument. Yet, with Elizabeth describing it as a *culture*, we can already see some of the far-reaching effects and anxieties that were triggered by the RAE. In fact, Strathern identified the RAE as one of the most powerful discourses in academia (Strathern, 2000). In a nutshell, The Research Assessment (RAE) can be explained as follows: 'RAE 2008 is the sixth in a series of exercises conducted nationally to assess the quality of UK research and to inform the selective distribution of public funds for research by the four UK Higher Education funding bodies. RAE 2008 will provide quality profiles for research across all disciplines. Submissions from institutions will be assessed by experts in some 70 units of assessment. The main body of the assessment will take place in 2007-2008' (RAE, 2008).<sup>73</sup> The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was implemented in the UK in the early 1980s due to the scarcity of state funding. Universities were increasingly treated as 'cost centres' with academics as 'work units' (Shore and Wright, 2002: 67). Thus, universities became more dependent on private sponsorship, reflecting a global trend in Higher Education (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). In the RAE, the productivity of researchers and departments are assessed (Parker, 2003). The rating of departments determines the amount of funding allocated by the state. With so-called 'objective criteria,' 'active researchers' can be discerned from 'less active researchers' (Willmott, 2003: 134). Yet, the fact that evaluators are not required to reveal how they reach their conclusions is inconsistent with the claim that the evaluation is governed by

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<sup>73</sup> <http://www.rae.ac.uk/aboutus/> [accessed 20 August 08].

transparency (Shore and Wright, 2000). The RAE is also rated as having a disastrous effect on Higher Education by the University College Union: ‘The RAE has had a disastrous impact on the UK Higher Education system, leading to the closure of departments with strong research profiles and healthy student recruitment. The RAE has been responsible for job losses, discriminatory practices, widespread demoralisation of staff, the narrowing of research opportunities through the over-concentration of funding and the undermining of the relationship between teaching and research, with a consequent reduction in the quality of Higher Education available to students. [...] The current exercise is stimulating even more ‘game-playing’, victimisation of individual members of staff, competitive recruitment, departmental closures and ‘restructuring’ driven purely by attempts, ill-fated or otherwise, to maximise RAE income. The exercise will further distort and disrupt the system and devalue the professional contribution of many staff to teaching and research [...]’ (UCU, 2005).<sup>74</sup>

The facts are clear. Yet, only in such a limited number of writings do the all-encompassing effects of the RAE on academics and their lives seem to be captured, going beyond a sketch of the technicalities of submission requirements but touching the theme that the RAE now seems to rule our lives, determines our work practices and our approach to the discipline. Based on informal interviews with academics at various universities in England, Andrew Sparkes looked at the stories behind the scenes and presented the ‘embodied struggles of an academic at a university that is permeated by an audit culture’ (Sparkes, 2007: 521). As he explains in the beginning

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm> [accessed 23 September 08].

of his article, his way of making sense of the RAE '[...] is inspired by partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors, fleeting glimpses of myriad reflections seen through broken glass, and multiple layers of fiction and narrative imaginings' (Sparkes, 2007: 521). In a similar way, just as Sparkes analysed the effects of the RAE on his respondents' lives, the RAE could be seen to be at the forefront of my own respondents' reflections. At the time of my interview encounters with my respondents between January and June 2007, my respondents were busily preparing their final RAE submissions. In fact, not being constantly aware of the RAE seems to be difficult. Moments of forgetting about *it* are rare, as I had recently had the chance of witnessing in a meeting with a colleague when he – after his three weeks of annual leave – was trying to remember the word to describe *the* phenomenon.

In fact, a lot of academics find themselves in a constant tension between more extant control, increasing workload and the pressure to satisfy these demands (Barrow, 1995). Whilst research is rewarded much more than teaching, Elizabeth describes her difficulties of responding to the demands of the RAE, being mainly occupied with teaching during term time and not finding enough time for research and publishing.

'I am not doing much research at the moment because I don't have enough time to. I don't have any major research projects at the moment. I am doing bits of writing. I am sort of between having finished a couple of book projects in the last couple of years, I am now thinking about what I might do next. My life at the moment, and mind that it is term time, is dominated by teaching and administration. And I have virtually no time to do any research. I have a few small things on the go but it is just not feasible.' (*Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university*)



As a young lecturer, Elizabeth has never known anything other than the current system. Yet, some of my respondents, like George, who studied in the 1950s and entered the academic labour market at the height of the Higher Education expansion, have experienced a massive change of the Higher Education system and working conditions within the span of a career. When he finished his graduate studies at the LSE, George was immediately offered a job:

‘And it was my generation that benefited from the expansion of the universities following the Robbins report. So there were plenty of jobs. There wasn’t any problem about when you finished postgraduate work whether you would get a job or not. People would head-hunt you. It was a lovely situation. An extraordinary situation and it will never be repeated. It meant that although I had no intention of becoming an academic initially, I got a job.’ (*George, 64, senior lecturer, 60s university*)

We are therefore also able to spot generational differences between those sociologists who started their careers under very different circumstances, thirty or forty years ago, and those respondents who have never experienced anything other than a highly performance-oriented and competitive academic landscape.<sup>75</sup> In addition, fulfilling the requirements of the RAE, researching and most of all publishing the required amount of publications in journals that are highly ranked by the RAE, is even more difficult for those academics who do not have a permanent contract. Hence, academics’ different positions and career histories already point to

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<sup>75</sup> In a longitudinal study on the career experience of men and women in British university sociology from 1950 to 2000 Jennifer Platt observed similar patterns as those that emerged across the different birth cohorts amongst my respondents (Platt, 2004).

different positions from which my respondents tackle the current challenges in Higher Education.

## **8.2    *The Glorification of Research: ‘How to Write One’s Career without Audience’ or ‘How to Count Nothing for Practising Critique in the Classroom’***

In the following we will analyse the impact of the current RAE culture on the relationship between teaching and research. We will look at respondents from different birth cohorts, academic positions and universities. More specifically, against the background of declining audiences and readership (Nixon, 1999), we will discuss the implications of the emphasis on research and publications for what we identified earlier as the critical calling of the sociological discipline. In other words, what is critique (for) if there is no audience?

Janet is a young research fellow in a 1960s university. She experiences academia as highly competitive and describes the RAE requirements for publications as particularly difficult to fulfill for academics at the beginning of their careers:

‘So many people are teaching on fifteen courses. And I am not because of the nature of my kind of post. So I am really lucky. There is tremendous pressure on younger scholars. It is enormously competitive. And I think that is quite hard. You are awarded for what you publish. So teaching really isn’t that important. As long as you teach on an adequate level, that’s fine. Research funding is becoming more important. Admin isn’t really; you have to tick particular boxes. But, essentially, it is what you publish. I think that is quite constraining, in particular for younger academics.’ (*Janet, 31, research fellow, 60s university*)

Janet notes that her 'luck' consists in having obtained a research fellow position. More than any other form of employment, this contract would facilitate her conforming to the requirements of the RAE. Her self-description as 'lucky' could further be understood as an expression of dislike for the activity of teaching. Notwithstanding her experiencing teaching as a rewarding occupation, Janet concedes that being almost 'free' from it and instead focusing on research would allow her to build a career. One way of looking at Janet's case is that her predominant preoccupation with research and her neglect of teaching are due to reasons that are not linked to her like or dislike of research and teaching as modes of practising the traditions of the discipline. In spite of teaching being assessed through Teaching Quality Assessment, performing well in teaching does not have the same status as excelling in the spheres of research output and publications (Skelton, 2004; Young, 2006). In fact, leaving aside occasional prizes for excellent teaching practice, there are hardly any structural incentives for engaging in teaching (Skelton, 2004). The unbalanced appraisal of teaching and research is further exemplified by Janet's statement that '[...] teaching really isn't that important. As long as you teach on an adequate level, that's fine'.

This disparity in rewards becomes most apparent in promotional matters. According to Gibbs, 'only 12% of promotion decisions are made on the basis of teaching excellence (only 10% in 'old' universities) and in 38% of universities no promotions at all are made on the grounds of quality of teaching' (Gibbs, 1995: 148). Furthermore, particularly in an RAE year, research experience and publications are put under far more scrutiny than teaching-related excellence (Young, 2006).

Young's research further shows that, with regard to teaching, 'basic competence was [thus] required but achievement or effort beyond this was not rewarded' (Young, 2006: 195). Whilst the emphasis on research-related output makes maintaining a position or advancing one's career particularly difficult for younger scholars, institutional affiliation is another variable that should be taken into account (Sikes, 2006). The starting conditions for competing within the RAE are very different for academics in post-1992 universities compared to those in pre-1992 institutions. Traditionally, most universities of the latter type have been strongly research-based and excelled in previous RAEs, whereas the so-called new universities have mainly focused on teaching. Yet, as Sikes illustrates, the 'shadow of the Research Assessment Exercise' has become bigger and is increasingly dominating the work practices and orientations of academics in post-1992 institutions (Sikes, 2006).

The hierarchies between these two types of university were consolidated as academics in the post-1992 universities have come to face a larger teaching workload than their peers in pre-1992 institutions. Thus, they have less time to invest in research. With the traditionally researched-based institutions having a strong track record of research that facilitates their success with research grant applications, the gap between old and new universities is widening. Hence, the chance of successfully participating in the research arena is comparatively more difficult for academics in post-1992 universities than for their colleagues in pre-1992 universities. With a reference to Merton's work, my respondent Arthur illustrates the advantage of being in a recognised institution:

‘Funding is always competitive. You will have an advantage if you are in a big recognised institution or if you have a track record. In other words, Merton said, he called it the Matthew principle. If you have a track record, it is easier to get another grant. So it is difficult to get started. It excludes those who are at the margins, which is a problem of course. But it has to do with all kinds of institutional perceptions and value for money. So it will reinforce the so-called centers of excellence to the detriment of others. Probably similar things happen with the RAE, where people are anxious that this will just divide the universities in two parts, teaching and lower-level universities and then proper research universities that also do teaching but are regarded much higher.’ (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

Whilst Arthur’s statement has been reiterated by many other respondents, the dominance of the RAE discourse slightly overshadows the fact that the asymmetries between the status ascribed to research and teaching were in place prior to the emergence of the audit culture. Particularly in old and established universities in the UK, ‘research productivity and quality judged by peer review has always been central to the academic labour process’ (Harley and Lee, 1997: 1429). Oili-Helena Ylijok refers to this phenomenon of idealising the research and teaching relationship from the past as ‘academic nostalgia’ (Ylijok, 2005). Based on qualitative interviews with 23 senior researchers in Finland, Ylijok found out that nostalgia does not describe the actual past of the research and teaching relationship but an idealisation of it, which seems to serve as a coping mechanism with the present (Ylijok, 2005). Whilst the study draws on data from Finnish universities, with performance measurement and audit culture being an almost common phenomenon in the Western Higher Education world, the conclusions of this study also bear relevance for the UK. Hence, one way of looking at this is that the pre-existing separation between research and teaching was further reinforced by the implementation of the RAE and the status ascribed to it. The dominance of the RAE discourse certainly

became evident with most of my respondents almost immediately mentioning the RAE as a shaping force of their general work experience. George increasingly observes that academics churn out unfinished research under the rule of the RAE, whilst teaching becomes devalued.

‘One of the problems about the public side of funding universities in this country is the disproportionate emphasis that is now put upon research within a specified time frame, the RAE. This is your production line for research. And it really does lead people to churning out work, quite understandably because it keeps tails clean, work that is not properly completed, not properly thought through. It is brought out in too much of a hurry. And teaching has become devalued. This is a department that hits well in terms of research funding but that means that some of our best staff as often as not are away for a year or two at a time, or sometimes three, because they are bought out with successful research funding applications. You know the system – you build into your funding the cost of your teaching, however long your research is going to take. The more successful your research is, the more successful you are going to be in doing that. So you often lose the best teachers to the production of research. The teaching is very important. That is one way of working with the public.’(George, 64, senior lecturer, University of London College)

As George explains, the irony is that through the RAE some of the best scholars are taken away – ‘bought out’ – from teaching. He considers this as particularly harmful, as it takes a toll on teaching. With regard to sociology, teaching, as one important way of working with the public, would thereby be underrated. The differential status and rewards for teaching and research has been the subject of sufficient investigation (Gibbs, 1995; Jenkins, 1995; McNay, 2003; Young, 2006; Lucas, 2006, 2007). Based on a study of geography departments in the UK, Jenkins argues that the current funding arrangements have encouraged individuals, departments and institutions to make research a priority at the expense of teaching (Jenkins, 1995). Young’s research on social policy lecturers’ perceptions of the

status and rewards for teaching and research reached similar conclusions. Unanimously, her respondents suggest that the status of teaching can only rise as its importance becomes reflected in appraisals similar to the RAE (Young, 2006).

In her case study of sociology, English and biology departments, Lucas investigated the impact of the RAE on departmental life (Lucas, 2006). She describes the game character of the RAE and identifies how accommodating and deviating from the requirements set by the assessment exercise are negotiated at the departmental level amongst academics, playing out disciplining and self-disciplining mechanisms (Lucas, 2006). According to her analysis, sociologists who deliberately decide to focus on teaching may elicit mixed reactions from their peers. This phenomenon also becomes evident in my respondents' narratives. Brian, a well-published reader in a post-1992 university, has always had a passion for teaching, and has pursued this activity beyond the teaching requirements of his senior position. Brian considers teaching as the university's main responsibility.

'One of the unintended consequences out of the RAE is this separation of teaching and research. All the glamorous attention. And I think it is such a great shame, such a great shame. I just feel that as a reader as well that it pushes me to one specific trajectory. You must be very stupid to do teaching. This year I teach year 1, year 2, year 3 students. Why should I involve myself in undergraduate teaching? That I don't like, that I really, really don't like. That glamour that is attached to research notwithstanding its value. And therefore devaluing teaching and the contribution made by my colleagues who teach only. Because that is still the main business of the university if you look at it. That glamour is totally out of proportion. I don't like that. So I don't know what I am going to get at the University of X. They will say you have to publish five books a year.' (*Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic*)

In an RAE-dominated environment, teaching undergraduates is not perceived as beneficial to an academic career and is seen to put departmental RAE results at risk. Brian knows that he could have advanced much faster in his career, had he left teaching aside. Putting more emphasis on teaching than was required, Brian could be considered as violating the ‘rules of the game’ – to use Lucas’ terms – that are set by the RAE and followed by most academics.

Coming to talk about the potential audiences of research, the stronger focus on research and publications in the last fifteen years has led to a massive expansion of the publishing market (Nixon, 1999). Yet, this expansion did not coincide with a widening of readership as my respondents report.

‘You want to make a contribution that is not forgotten. But the reality is that scientometrics, statistics tell you that more than 90 per cent is never quoted. That is the reality of scientific reality. So most of the things that get produced get forgotten. If rightly or wrongly we don’t know. And lots of effort goes into that. And there is more and more of it. So it is a huge market place. Everybody has to get the attention of others.’  
*(Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university)*

Knowing that so little of what is published is actually read makes it even more difficult to justify the current emphasis on research and publishing.

‘I am not sure that an awful lot of academic research through journals has any impact outside a very small readership. I am not sure how much of it is read at all. Maybe some of the more applied research is more useful in that sense. But I am fairly skeptical. Maybe I believe in some sense of scholarship for its own sake or in order to be a good teacher. But the orientation is entirely in the opposite direction now. And I think sociologists in particular and other social scientists in general are kidding themselves to think what they are saying is of interest to the wider world and I don’t think it is particularly. To a point yes, but not to



the degree that would justify the sort of emphasis on journal contributions in particular, as it currently stands.’ (*Elizabeth*, 39, *lecturer, old university*)

Elizabeth believes in good scholarship for its own sake, and in teaching. Yet, she cannot relate in any way to the overrating of particular formats of publishing – articles in selected journals. Whilst there have been restrictions with regard to publications that count for the RAE, Sociology RAE contributions are not – as Elizabeth mentions – confined to journal articles only. Rather, the Sociology RAEs up to now have recognised both monographs and book chapters and have taken a fairly pluralistic view of relevant journals. Whilst the peer reviews of this range of material still involve surveillance and differentiation, the RAE for Economics and Business have been observed to be far more restrictive (Harley and Lee, 1997). Yet, with the development of rankings and index measures of top journals, RAE publishing requirements are about to enter the next stage that will severely affect academic publishing. However, as can be seen from the latest ranking by impact factor for journals of sociology indexed by Thomson Reuters in its Journal Citations Report for the social sciences for 2007, only two of the ten top journals are based in the UK (Times Higher Education Supplement, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2008)<sup>76</sup>. As Nixon found from a study of senior editors in the UK publishing industry, the academic publishing market has become more professionalised and fragmented. Publications are targeted at a more segmented audience, with access being increasingly restricted and a more general public hardly being addressed (Nixon, 1999). This also reflects a more general trend of increasing specialisation in academia. Sociologists would

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403493> [accessed 11 September 08].

therefore focus on addressing a more specialised audience of their peers, rather than the sociological community as a whole (Scott, 2005b).

The fact that the core knowledge-producing institutions are often unable to provide their academics with access to journals – sometimes even the key ones – further curtails the claim that research needs to be disseminated widely. The limited readership of what is produced and the increasing specialisation of sociology itself further become apparent in departmental life. Many of my respondents report a lack of exchange about each other's work within departments. Rather than engaging with their colleagues' work from down the corridor, most of my respondents were struggling to keep up with publications in their field of expertise in order to keep up to date with the latest developments. Furthermore, many of my respondents deplored the lack of institutional incentives to publish outside merely academic publications. Christopher, a well-published lecturer from a 60s five-star department, mentions that his recent publication in an international journal was recognised for the RAE, whereas his numerous articles and commentaries in newspapers did not count.

'My social and political goal as a sociologist is still to apply my own sort of skills and tools to real-world problems to as wide an audience as possible. And so rather than just speaking to other academics, you know, I want to talk to ordinary people out there. And talk to through my writing as well as my research. And for me that means publishing in newspapers, in magazines. Writing research reports for organisations that will disseminate them widely, going to a parliament committee and so on. For me personally, that's far more valuable than writing an article in an academic journal that maybe, nobody will ever read. And on some occasions, people will never read them.

You know I had some articles that had been cited a lot and I had other articles that have not been cited at all. And you know, my own view about the academic journals is that just sociologists are reading them, maybe a few other people beyond that, but that's about the boundary of

the readership. And personally, my own political commitment is to disseminate the ideas as widely as possible. However, professionally, that's a huge problem.' (*Christopher, 49, lecturer, 60s university*)

He argues that the audience sizes reached by the two media are not comparable: the academic journal article, according to his estimation, may have been read by only five people, whereas the more publicly available piece reached 20,000 to 30,000 readers. With only journal articles in recognised journals contributing to the RAE, the spectrum of all research contributions and formats of expressions that do *not* count is very big indeed. It covers the classic scholarly contribution of the monograph, more frequent formats of dissemination such as more popular journals and newspapers, as well as formats of dissemination that make use of new media – such as online publications, exhibitions or films.<sup>77</sup> For other respondents like Lydia, a 32-year-old lecturer in a 60s university five-star department, the vocational claim of contributing to critique in society and making an impact with one's work could not possibly be upheld in the light of what she identifies as declining and increasingly fragmented readerships. Rather, Lydia reveals sociologists' attempts to construct their identities around research and its potential impact on society as disguised forms of justifying their careers:

'I think a lot of sociologists and academics speak in quite purist terms about a quest for truth and knowledge and a better way to understand the world and from that a better way to understand the world; therefore an access point to changing the world, to making it a better place. I kind of feel they are talking out of their asses a little bit. It is not really about that. That we are about defining our little remit on the world. About creating a name. It is much more a personal project than a lot of people acknowledge. I think about what I have written about [her topic] and I

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<sup>77</sup> In 'On Communicating Critique: Being a Public Intellectual' and in 'The Sound of a Lived Discipline' we will come back to other ways and formats of practising and disseminating research that go far beyond the common journal article.

think about the number of people who are going to read that and I think it seems ridiculous to therefore claim that what I am doing, makes the world a better place. I am not really. I am making my career for myself. That is a kind of a different sort of project. I am doing it in a way that is fortunate. But it is about me and not about improving the world.’ (*Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university*)

Yet, with Lydia’s being a lecturer in a research-led five-star department, I am intrigued by what her statement could mean for her own case. Without hesitation, her answer to my question about how she justifies doing research other than on vocational grounds was: ‘I do this in order to boost my career’. Whilst this could be seen as an example of self-reflexivity, it is also an expression of disillusionment and disappointment.

A lot of my respondents found their disciplinary ambitions of practising critical inquiry and sharing knowledge widely compromised by the current conditions of work that prioritise research over teaching. The emphasis on research and particular publication formats, and their limited consumption in the public sphere, has challenged sociologists’ initial aspirations in taking up the profession. Christopher described academia as a corrupt system. The disproportionate relationship between research and teaching and what counts as research and as a publication stands at odds with his political commitment as a sociologist to disseminate ideas as widely as possible. Christopher’s and Lydia’s narratives are by no means isolated voices but characterise the views of half of my respondents. Whilst sociologists claim to stimulate critical discourse, the realities of how research and teaching are currently organised and rewarded do not seem to hold up to the academic aspirations mentioned earlier. It is not a surprise that this partly results in frustration and a more

general questioning of the utility of academic endeavour as a whole. How do these sociologists ultimately negotiate their initial disciplinary aspirations to practise critical inquiry? In 'PART III: Living Sociology', we will come back to these crucial questions.

## 9 Sociology's Synthetic Character at Risk

In the previous section we analysed the impact of the current RAE culture on the relationship between teaching and research. In this section we would like to shed more light on how a culture of auditing and assessment leaves its traces on the diversity of the field and the quality of its research. In 'PART I: THE CALLING OF SOCIOLOGY – SOCIOLOGISTS' CLAIMS AND ASPIRATIONS' we had identified two variants of the concept of synthesis amongst my respondents. First of all, taking August Comte as a reference point, we identified an imperialistic 'queen of the social sciences' narrative that seeks to subordinate other disciplines. The second synthesis-narrative we could observe amongst some of my respondents emphasised openness and intellectual permeability and seems to subordinate sociology as a distinctive discipline to the requirements of inter-disciplinary dialogue. Most importantly, our diagnosis in the following chapter is that one of sociology's key features – its synthetic character – is at risk. On the one hand, practising synthesis can be constrained by the RAE and its requirements; on the other hand, through peer review, sociologists themselves often seem to impose purist views on what sociology is on their peers.

In 2003, the Commission on the Social Sciences for the UK expressed concerns that research has become a 'minor' category within everyday academic working routine and sociology would thus run the risk of producing redundant knowledge

(Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003). What the Commission meant was that whilst research is highly rewarded in academia, the different requirements within current academic life such as teaching and administration would often not allow for research to be pursued in a manner that results in innovative knowledge rather than in the reuse of previously published material. As a consequence of this, the Commission diagnoses that the quality of research is decreasing. In a similar vein, Rappert argues that the decrease in deviations from mainstream sociological research might be explained by the rising pressure to respond to the demands of the market and the topics set by funding institutions (Rappert, 1999). As Harley and Lee found out for economics and business studies in the UK, the deliberate selection of journals that are considered as RAE core journals puts additional constraints on academics: 'Research productivity and quality judged by peer review has always been central to the academic labor process in the old universities in the UK and is beginning to become so in the new. What has changed is the context in which research is produced and hierarchical managerial controls to which it is now subjected. What is new is that the self-refereeing quality of the academic labor process has been harnessed to managerial ends through a centrally organized and bureaucratically-controlled research selectivity exercise. Informal peer review within a collegiate system of control is very different from institutionalized peer review linked to a ranking system designed for funding purposes' (Harley and Lee, 1997: 1429). As the failure to comply with these demands means that researchers risk not getting published, losing funding or even their jobs, Willmott points out that the likely consequences for the intellectual behaviour of researchers should be considered (Willmott, 2003). Under these conditions, as Lyotard already anticipated

in the 1980s, knowledge production can be very much ossified and reduced to information (Lyotard, 1984).

While Harley's and Lee's insights on the RAE and its impact on economics and business studies bear relevance for sociology, there is also indication that the situation in sociology is not as severe as in economics and business studies. It has been stated by several informants that Sociology RAE panels have been a lot less prescriptive about defining key journals than many other panels, and have also recognised monographs and book chapters. However, from our data it became evident that those respondents who work at the boundaries with other disciplines – thereby apparently practising one of the key features originally inscribed into the discipline – do seem to experience the prescriptive measures of their own discipline. This becomes apparent on several levels. Their drawing on various bodies of knowledge and methodologies – be it the arts and humanities or the natural sciences – seems to create frictions in academic life. This may be due to the fact that, for the most part, as Becher explains, academia is still predominantly organised in clear-cut disciplines, or academic tribes and territories (Becher, 2001). In addition, academic journals do not encourage the submission of work that may not be clearly allocable to a particular discipline. Celine, who has been working with neighbouring disciplines in the humanities, reports on her problems in finding a publisher for her work.

'But we must say that we wanted to create an interdisciplinary collection. And we wanted to bring in a quite well-known literary writer and photographers. A lot of publishers didn't want it like that. They said it's everything to everyone and where does it sit? See, that's another



problem. Where does it sit? In the end, we tried about ten publishers. We had to get rid of the filmmakers, the photographers and the writer. They are all brilliant. Now it has become just an academic journal. But it includes sociologists, historians, anthropologists. However, it shows how people talk about interdisciplinarity, but you can't always take it forward. We tried a lot. And we felt very bad about dropping people.' (Celine, 40, senior lecturer, University of London College)

Celine did not enjoy the disapproval of publishers in her attempt to work in a synthetic manner and subsequently had to reconfigure the collection of contributions in order to make it more 'sociological'. Celine's description of the case being interdisciplinary reveals a common paradox in relation to the discourse on interdisciplinarity and sociology. In fact, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are often referred to as if they were creations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, these are very old ideas, going back to classical social theorists such as Comte. Furthermore, current sociologists who practise sociology in this manner, living its original synthetic moment, are often accused of not working sociologically. Similarly to Celine, Annette, a senior lecturer in a London university, experiences difficulties in practising sociology in a synthetic manner. She describes her work as very interdisciplinary, being located at the intersection of science studies, gender studies, sociology, the arts and the natural sciences. While key sociological themes run through her work, from outside she often experienced rejection and felt forced to explain the specific sociological element of her work.

'One of the constraints of being an academic at the moment, I imagine this is true for lots of disciplines, but I experience that in sociology, is what counts as sociological in relation to funding applications, publications, who referees things. The difficulty of boundaries. That really has been a problem for me. When I was more junior, I thought that I was sexy and interesting for that reason. For the reason that it didn't kind of fit and it was kind of quirky. As I had gone on a bit I actually

find it frustrating and humiliating that it doesn't fit.' (*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

Annette realised for herself that whilst her ideas are sociological in essence, this was not always recognised as such by the sociological environments she found herself in. The fact that a number of journals are more or less deliberately selected as core journals for the RAE further constrains academics intellectually. In this context, the defining power of the Research Assessment Exercise in what counts as sociology further reinforces the pressure to stick to a more purist understanding of what sociology is. The intellectual and institutional constraints Annette has been facing for many years, working at the intersection with the natural sciences on the one hand and artists on the other hand, made her reflect on her relationship with sociology in more detail. In fact, the pressures of funding and publishing forced her to bring her thoughts on sociology as a discipline and its key moments to the forefront. In a nutshell, these pressures gave rise to a whole intellectual endeavour in its own right:

'That was a kind of anxiety that I have had about whether I should or shouldn't see myself as a sociologist. Even though I had always said, I am a sociologist and I always stuck to it. Largely, when people say to you, you are not a sociologist, it comes from a number of angles. It can come from people who review your articles and say this does not fit in. And you think, of course it does, it is central to this journal, how can you not see it. [...] Finally I thought, what I should do is explain how work that is sometimes seen on the boundaries actually relates directly to core sociological issues. And suddenly it has become incredibly easy to phrase, and put my work into that context. It is an enormous relief on a whole number of levels. This is why I identify as a sociologist, I want to say that explicitly, these are the reasons. It also gives me a hook.'

(*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

Annette is by no means alone in her diagnosis of what sociology is about. In 'Key Features of Sociological Thought and Sociologists' Aspirations' we discussed

synthesis as one of sociology's key features. In his introductory lectures to sociology, Adorno describes sociology as follows: '[...] I think that one only does justice to the essential nature of sociology if one recognizes its non-specialist character from the outset' (Adorno, 2000: 102). In further elaborations, Adorno provides an answer to the question of sociology's subject matter: 'To this I would answer first of all quite simply that it is reflection on social moments within any given area of subject matter – reflections ranging from the simple physiognomic registration of social implications to the formulation of theories on the social totality. Sociology is oriented towards these moments in a necessary, not a peripheral way, so that in order to be possible at all, it must have areas of subject matter within it, which are, in themselves, alien to it' (Adorno, 2000: 103). Adorno's explanation on sociology's subject matter again lends itself to drawing on various sources in order to do justice to the questions we ask as sociologists. Annette's struggles in locating herself on the current sociological map may be slightly eased in the light of Adorno's words.

So far we mainly tried to explain some of the prescriptive effects of the RAE and the limitations some sociologists thereby face in practising synthesis. However, not all of it can be explained with economic mechanisms. The other mechanism that seems to be at play is that certain sociologists, "purists," as Paul calls them, do not recognise the sociological nature of expressions of the sociological outside the discipline.

'Back to that question of what is sociology. I have had these discussions and I have got friends and people I was taught under, who are purists, I

think, sociological purists that believe that the boundaries between sociology and other disciplines should be quite distinct. We should work to protect our own discipline from invasion by others. And that Foucault and cultural studies and all these other disciplines have had a negative impact on sociology. That is kind of a narrow definition of sociology. And then there are other people, and I have kind of moved into this direction myself, who argue that sociology should be more porous, it should be more open to a range of perspectives and fields. And I think much of what is going on in sociology these days is affected by its funding. Many of the funding bodies like the ESRC, these days, if you look at the applications for funding they are actually encouraging interdisciplinarity and projects which are interdisciplinary. So I think that has a huge impact on the eventual shape of the discipline. It does not necessarily have an effect on people's projects because people can see their projects in interdisciplinary terms even if they are not necessarily sold on the idea of interdisciplinarity. Because they need the money to finance a particular project. So this is kind of one way in which the discipline has been shaped from outside, if you like.' (Paul, 33, *postdoc fellow, 60s university*)

Following Paul, economic mechanisms and the research selectivity that is thereby enforced play in favour of those representatives of the discipline who have a stronger leaning towards a more purist understanding of the discipline and act prescriptively towards others. While Paul has on the one hand been describing some of his peers as purist, he has been observing that some funding institutions, on the other hand, encourage interdisciplinary work. Yet, this would not find its perpetuation with publishers and with the RAE. Hayley, a professor from a red-brick university, reports on similar experiences in relation to purist and non-purist sociologists. In Hayley's description of sociology, she makes a distinction between doing proper and improper sociology. Depending on her audience – sociologists or other disciplines – she experiences herself as a proper or improper sociologist. Hence, her self-perception as 'not proper' is related to the prescriptive effects she experienced within the profession and a purist understanding of what sociology is.

On the other hand, she still sees herself as doing proper sociology, referring to sociology's origins.

'Yes, I think I've got quite a strong identity as a sociologist. But I don't think I am necessarily a proper sociologist. So I think the sociology I do is right at the edge of the discipline at its intersection with various other disciplines. So I think when I am with people from other disciplines I always feel like a sociologist. When I am with sociologists I never feel like a proper sociologist. But I think it is a fairly strong part of my identity.' (*Hayley, 42, professor, red-brick university*)

Working at the intersection with psychology and in particular psychoanalysis, getting her work published in sociological journals seems to be more difficult than she would have expected. This is related to the fact that she encountered resistance within sociology whenever she employed 'other' bodies of knowledge to investigate a sociological question.

'I think at the moment I am feeling that difference from other sociologists very strongly because I got very interested in psychoanalysis. And I am sort of constantly coming up against a lot of hostility [...] I mean the hold of social constructionism is so powerful that to step outside makes you feel that you are not being a proper sociologist. [...] So working on that kind of psycho-social borderline of the discipline now really adds to my sense of not being a proper sociologist. And you know it reminds me how much it was drummed into me when I was doing my undergraduate degree. Sociology and psychology are separate disciplines and it goes back to Durkheim and that sort of policing of the borders. It is still going on, hugely. I mean I had an article turned down by X that was trying to do psychoanalytic work with sociology. And X turned it down. And you know, being turned down by the journal that speaks to the BSA and is the defining journal of British Sociology, you know. First of all it is a bit of knock to the ego but actually trying to understand what has happened is, because what I was saying wasn't sociology as it is defined in British sociology. That's the way I see it. So that sort of thing leads to a sense of outside, what is proper in your discipline. I mean I did get the article published, it is published in Y. And I probably should have gone there first because I

think it is a bit of a more open journal.’ (Hayley, 42, professor, red-brick university)

Hayley’s case makes it even more apparent that the institutional voices of sociology that are manifested at the level of departments and journals have a defining power in saying what sociology is. This can be experienced as constraining, and as Hayley mentioned, can reinforce the tendency of feeling outside one’s own discipline. Yet, facing difficulties publishing one’s work cannot only be perceived as a knock to the ego, as Hayley put it; it can have far more material consequences. In a time when publication output is inextricably linked with the Research Assessment, not getting published in the right journals may be detrimental to one’s career progress. This is echoed by Willmott, who discusses the reinforcing effects of the RAE that is coupled with the credo of ‘the needs of the industry’ and ‘the use of peer review to legitimize this process’ (Willmott, 2003: 130). This is also confirmed by Wright’s, Thompson’s and Channer’s research on black female academics and the additional pressures they are exposed to within the Research Assessment Exercise (Wright *et al.*, 2007). Celine, a senior lecturer in a London University, also elaborates on the defining power of the Research Assessment Exercise.

‘That’s a constant anxiety. That’s when we start having these conversations about what is sociology. How are we contributing to it? Will the Sociology RAE panel see what we are doing as sociological? That is sort of when the discipline becomes imposed on us. It does have an impact. Because some of us publish in different places. I have done a special issue on X and Y. It’s not classical sociology domain. But it’s really interesting to look at what all of the people have written. [...] I think that’s the thing, people have multiple influences. I am very much influenced by other art practitioners. I don’t want to be an artist but I am interested in working with them and to go back and forth. So we do have to be careful how we present ourselves so that we get the best ranking.’ (Celine, 40, senior lecturer, University of London College)

As we could see in this chapter, sociologists who live up to the origins of the discipline and draw on various bodies of knowledge in order to answer questions about the social seem to face increasing constraints imposed by the discipline. Whilst this is partly related to the institutional pressures in the context of the RAE, irrespective of that, we could see that sociologists seem to be at the forefront of disciplining other sociologists for not conforming to what they consider ‘proper’ and ‘pure’ sociology. In ‘Living Synthesis’ and ‘The Sound of a Lived Discipline’ we will revisit the various ways in which some of my respondents – against the constraints they face within the discipline – practise what we revealed to be a key feature of sociology: synthesis.

## **10 When the Public is Not Bigger Than an Office Space**

In 'PART I: THE CALLING OF SOCIOLOGY – SOCIOLOGISTS' CLAIMS AND ASPIRATIONS', my respondents emphasised the role of critique in sociology. Disseminating knowledge and contributing to public discourse were stated as major disciplinary aims. This particularly involved the production of critique within the university and outside. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the importance of this claim was emphasised again by Michael Burawoy in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association in 2004 (Burawoy, 2005). There is hardly any other text that has recently triggered a similar kind of discourse. With his address being entitled 'For Public Sociology', Burawoy's intellectual reference to Alvin Gouldner's 'For Sociology', becomes clear. What sparked Burawoy's preoccupation with public sociology was his diagnosis that sociology was becoming an increasingly professionalised activity that neglected the practice of critique. In eleven theses Burawoy suggests counterstrategies for sociology's revival of its engagement with the public, or various publics, as he puts it (Burawoy, 2005).

The question of whether my respondents engage with the public or publics in their work went hand in hand with a clarification of the term. Whilst they wanted me to explain what exactly was meant with the question, I kept it deliberately open and



wanted my respondents to create meanings themselves. Subsequently, the meanings associated with public or publics were very diverse and covered a wide range, from academic peers and students to diverse non-academic publics such as policy-makers, agencies up to community groups and the wider public that can be addressed via different media channels. Despite of this variety, it was interesting to note that almost all of my respondents at first associated ‘public’ with non-academic publics.

‘Yeah, so I count that [dealing with academic audiences] as not having had much experience with the public. That’s why I said I didn’t have much experience with the public. Yes, that’s right. Publishing for academic audiences. [...] this piece of work is directed at sociologists. So I never think of them as public.’ (*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

This understanding of the public as a non-academic audience stands in contrast to the official university discourse of predominantly disseminating knowledge to academic peers. What is implicit in Annette’s association of the notion of the public with non-academic publics is that academia and academic media are perceived as inward looking spaces rather than as a public. Whilst the statistics of declining readership and my respondents’ personal experience of often not receiving any response to academic publications speak their own language, many of my respondents have nevertheless reported not having a lot of experience in the engagement with groups other than purely academic ones, or with formats outside the journal article and the research monograph. For those interviewees who carried out research that was policy-related and funded by government-related bodies and agencies or international bodies, providing their research results in a format other than a strictly academic report was part of the requirement. Elizabeth, who has done

a lot of work for the health sector and for urban planning, reports on her way of disseminating research.

‘That sort of public outreach as well as the research engagement have been fairly core to my work. I have also gone quite often to present research to user groups, voluntary organisations as well as conferences in those fields. And indeed, most of the dissemination of my research has not been through academic journals, it has been more through other agencies, because of the funding. And of course some of it will then feed into academic work. But not primarily, not as the first output. [...] These are just research reports and publications which are then published by the web via the funding agencies. Which I think is a very good way of disseminating research. And more and more I think it is a way to reach an audience and a readership. And in the graduate program I am involved in here we are seeking to publish students’ work on the web so that they can put it out in the world. And I access a lot of material via the web. I think there is a trend now for academics to publish on their own web pages. To have have links to their writing. I think that’s a very good move. I am not sure how happy the journals would be about that. But it does make it easier for students in particular to access academic writing.’  
(Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university)

Elizabeth thinks that there is real mileage in her approach to the public. Choosing forms of writing other than academic journals would make academic work more approachable. However, she notes that the way she has been working with the public does not necessarily fulfill the requirements of the RAE. This already indicates that any kind of discussion on sociologists’ involvement with the public cannot be seen separately from the complex conditions of knowledge production in the UK and the system of rewards that is in place with the RAE. As only certain publications are recognised for potentially attaining a more permanent position, maintaining a job or making career progress, there are no institutional incentives in place for the engagement with publics other than academic ones in strictly academic formats and in particular journals. Hence, against this background, funding institutions’ partial

requirements of disseminating widely can by no means alter most academics’ – and most of my respondents’ – reluctant behaviour in disseminating research outside RAE-recognised formats. Whilst Stephen would welcome more alternative ways of addressing the public, he thinks that it is because of the institutional rewards related to the RAE that alternative routes of disseminating research that could be promising in reaching audiences are not taken up as widely.

‘There is real possibility for communicating, in writing online, in terms of the audience you might reach. That audience is very difficult to measure. Unfortunately, within the culture of academic auditing, online publication doesn’t matter for anything. We are still trapped in a paper model. But I just don’t think we should be limited or confined by that. That is easy for me to say who stumbled in that academic world at a time, I was lucky, basically. And that is different to people who desperately need to get their four publications that can be put in for the RAE.’ (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

Stephen is aware of the fact that as a well-published professor, stepping on alternative routes of publishing is easier than for a young academic. Within the logic of a RAE rewards system, it would therefore follow that more advanced academics and academics in research-oriented institutions have better starting conditions, both to fulfill the requirements of the RAE and to communicate with the public in alternative formats. However, from our data it cannot be concluded that the intensity of public engagement of younger scholars at the beginning of their careers would in any way differ from more advanced and established academics for reasons of positionality.<sup>78</sup> It thus remains unexplained why so many of my respondents who find themselves in comparatively privileged positions are still reluctant to address the public in alternative ways.

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<sup>78</sup> See ‘Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview’ for further examples.

In a similar way, looking at those of my respondents who could be described as seeking alternative formats of research dissemination on a regular basis, we cannot locate a specific pattern of socio-economic status and type of university that correlates with this behaviour. Nine out of thirty respondents did engage with other formats of media on a regular basis. Amongst them are people from all types of universities and positions. Whilst some of them do find themselves in more privileged positions, the claim that empirical conditions are the only factors that would determine my respondents' leaning towards public engagement cannot be upheld. Looking more closely at those respondents of mine who were interested in engaging with publics, what they have in common in one way or another is their understanding of their role as sociologists as contributors to social change. Irrespective of their position, they also see it as their duty as sociologists to feed back their research, having been paid by the taxpayer.

‘Well, some of it, I think is a sense of that I am spending public money and public money is spent on me and on my research. You know there is a sort of duty. And I do have this strong sense of the kind of privilege of being able to do research and spending all this time in the academy and it is a sort of citizenry duty or it is the responsibility of the researcher to feed back their research. And if you just say I am going to write about it in sociology journals and slightly dense publications, published by University Press or Routledge, it doesn't feel like enough. So to be able to say, I will probably try and write something for the Guardian. So it is about a sense of responsibility to the people I have interviewed, it is about a sense of responsibility to the wider sort of social. And it is this sort of I suppose maybe slightly naïve belief that intervening in the public realm does shift the terms in debate. If I have got things to say about topic X, I need to say that not only to other sociologists, I need to say that to policy-makers, I need to say that. Because there is part of me, this political activist bit in me from when I was seventeen, that says, if you don't do that, what you are doing is quite pointless. If you don't go beyond the sort of formal academic realms of dissemination, you are not

really going to change anything.’ (*Hayley, professor, 42, red-brick university*)

For Hayley, choosing media that reach a wider audience is justified on the grounds of her disciplinary aims as a sociologist and the social responsibility that follows from her receiving public funds. Whilst there can be no denial of the shaping force of the RAE on academics’ behaviour with regard to the public, this argument in itself cannot explain the still-existing variety in my respondents’ engagement with the public. The comparative absence from the public arena stands in stark contrast to sociologists’ strong disciplinary claim of contributing to public discourse.<sup>79</sup> In the following, we will therefore investigate the reasons for my respondents’ lack of engagement with the public. As a key example for sociologists disseminating research beyond these channels we will look into sociologists’ relationship with journalism and the media.

There seems to be an enormous fear of the world outside. My respondents brought up a lot of different arguments that ultimately add up to the same narrative: fear of the media and fear of distortion. The common argument was that the media would work according to a different agenda. Journalists would reduce complexity and would have different interests. While academics work on a long-term scale, journalists produce written work on a daily basis. Besides, the agenda of journalists would be to attain an audience that is as large as possible. That would, so it is claimed by many of my respondents, often go hand in hand with a distortion of

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<sup>79</sup> In the following, the discussion around sociologists’ engagement with various publics will center around contributions in non-academic print media, radio, TV and internet. However, we would not wish the focus on these media to be mistaken as a comprehensive notion of the public or publics that is employed in this thesis. Certainly, direct relationships with communities are equally important. We will come back to this aspect in ‘Living Sociology’.

research at the cost of more complex details that seem to be difficult to convey. Distinctions were further made according to the type of media. Some of my respondents feared distortion particularly by low-quality tabloids. This was also the case for some radio stations. Certain respondents, particularly those whose research topics appeal to a wider public, reported having had negative experiences.

‘If you see the academic as a public, that’s where I see my work is going at the moment primarily. In some ways I actively fight to keep it that way. And I am not quite sure why. There is always a risk that any talk about obesity tends to get taken up in a sort of more popular discourse very quickly. For example my name is on a couple of websites. And when all the ‘oh, all fat children are going to die’ stories broke into the papers, I was phoned up by five different newspapers asking me to comment on school dinners, which I know nothing about. And I don’t even want to go there. And so I feel quite strongly about that. [...] I get quite defensive about that. I really dislike the idea of its being taken up and turned into something else, without my being able to control it. [...] Yeah, it is nice that it is a current topic but it is one of those things that makes this jump very, very quickly from the kind of academic approach, the kind of approach we might have for it as sociologists, if you like. And the jump is very quick in the public domain, if you allow it to. And it skips over. There is a lot of literature that skips straight through to the public, the kind of “We should eat less and exercise more”.’ (*Mary, 39, lecturer, 60s university*)

Mary thinks that her research topic lends itself to being perceived by the media in a simplistic way. For this reason she would rather stay away from the media and predominantly address academic audiences. Mary is aware of her inconsistent position. The fact that she would have almost no editorial control over what a journalist would write would make her even less likely to agree to working with journalists. Whilst there should be no denial about the partly superficial practices of certain media and the problematic ways in which they often present knowledge, completely retreating from the media stands equally at odds with our initial claim as

sociologists to contribute to public discourse. This is even more striking as Mary mentions that it is nice to know that there is interest in her research topic, as it strikes a chord in the public. Mary's defensive reaction is by no means a singular event. Yet, some of my respondents, like Janet or Christopher, actively sought counterstrategies against distortion by writing articles themselves.<sup>80</sup> Other respondents do acknowledge the opportunities that arise from writing editorials or commentaries in newspapers. Yet, the arguments that are mostly brought forward against those forms of entering the public arena are time constraints. This again relates back to the problem of institutional rewards for certain academic publications as opposed to others. Another argument against potentially encountering hegemonic narratives of discourse in the public domain was that academics would not be able to write in the way journalists do.

‘I think if you are a journalist you don't struggle over every word as you do when you are writing academic stuff, every word seems to carry a lot of weight. And I think writing is something very difficult.’ (*Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university*)

Charles, a professor at an old university, argues that sociologists would neither have the ability nor the training to act as writers for newspapers. Rather than suggesting that academics on a grand scale should improve their communication skills, Charles is in favour of having more intermediaries who could fill the gap sociologists seem to be unable to fill. In this respect, Laurie Taylor and Polly Toynbee are both mentioned as excellent social science communicators by many of my respondents. Whilst this could be seen as one

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<sup>80</sup> In 'Living Sociology' we will portray a few respondents who seek the dialogue with various publics despite the constraints they sometimes face in relation to the media.

potential solution to the problem, one can also interpret Charles' argument as an excuse for perpetuating academics' impenetrable communication styles. Mary was not alone in stating the loss of intellectual authority as the main reason for staying away from the media world. Arthur interprets this defensive behaviour as an expression of sociologists feeling potentially threatened by journalists and anticipating a potential loss of their authority as knowledge producers. What Arthur points to is that we now compete with knowledge producers who may produce similar insights but who are, in comparison to us, much faster. Yet, this dilemma is not made that explicit by many of my respondents. Arthur allows himself a joke about my own research by saying that the lengthy and labour-intensive process of carrying out thirty qualitative interviews with sociologists could probably have been done much more quickly by a Times Higher journalist, coming to similar conclusions.

'You want to do a study on sociologists and similar things could be done by a journalist by the Times Higher, calling 32 departments and doing a quick and dirty job. And then come up with similar conclusions. They might give a spin on it. It is competition in terms of knowledge sources. This is one of the most fundamental changes I see happening. We have many more people who are knowledgeable, not only the lay people who are professing their views but people who have university education, who are journalists, writers, media people, NGOs. And they all know to a large extent what they are talking about. And this is a problem for all the sciences for all knowledge producers who previously thought they are in the ivory tower. Who, per definition, thought that what they say will be the truth. But the reality is different. You need to constantly engage and make the point that what you have to say is in some ways more profound or more credible or better researched or whatever. [...] And they are all much quicker than we are. So we have a problem of speed and choosing the right topics and projects that will be visible and make contributions to such debates. And that's why our theories are so important, because we do it in a different way than journalists or writers do it. [...] I don't think we are outdated. But we have to make an effort



to show that this is different from everyday understanding.’ (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

This also resonates with what Gibbons *et al.* describe as the shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 production of knowledge, whereby universities can no longer claim authority as the only knowledge producers (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). As Beck has argued, the diffusion of sociological knowledge becomes particularly evident in the media, where notions that were initially defined and used by sociologists have left the academic realm and dispersed into the public arena (Beck, 2005). Similarly, Ehrenreich argues that sociologists seem to have an identity problem once they realise that journalists may also hold a sociology degree or are very well informed (Ehrenreich, 2007). Arthur’s conclusion is that whilst we have to recognise that other knowledge producers such as journalists compete with us, we would need to emphasise what it is that distinguishes us from them. According to him, we would do this by using theory.

There are a number of paradoxes to observe with sociologists’ relationship with the public. Whilst they fear a loss of expertise in the public domain, at the same time they tend to justify their absence from the wider public or their rejection of a media request with a lack of expertise for the specific area in question. In a similar vein, respondents often claimed that there was an overflow of superficial knowledge out there that sociologists should encounter with their research. However, they would not wish to be on TV or on the radio themselves as this seems to reinstate a kind of certainty around the knowledge they purvey.

‘I think in really general terms, all researchers should make their research public and they should make the process of the research public as well. I think there is a massive uncertainty about what makes good research, which you see most clearly in research in what makes healthy food. It is now pomegranates, whereas last month it was blueberries. And this is based on problematic research and problematic reading. The more research is in the public domain, the more people are sensitised. I think it is something that time and money and thought goes into, that research and the principle of communicating that seems quite important. And I think it is a good skill to have. But not the same as wanting to do it myself.’ (*Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university*)

Another reason that is stated for my respondents’ absence from the media is the fact that academic knowledge is also widely employed as a means of lending institutional credibility to a point the medium would wish to make anyway. In other words, academics are used for the sake of their status rather than for their actual contribution. However, even taking this into account, it is striking to see how often my respondents mention that they would not wish to speak on a particular topic, as they see it to be outside of their area of expertise.

‘Not very often, but very regularly we are asked to comment on stem cells or this or that. And I think we shouldn’t do that. If you don’t have a solid expertise in the area, why would you want to do that? And the risks are far too high. If you pronounce something silly because you didn’t know you are on record – of course most people don’t notice it – but you are saying something off guard. But it is a completely different situation. And your label is only used to give some credential to some news source. That’s the deal. You only do that because you want to promote your name and your institution. There are reasons for doing it. If you think about public engagement and integrity and responsibility, there are also some downsides. The view that the public intellectual has an obligation to do that and should speak out applies to people who really feel strongly about things and then they don’t mind anymore and they fight the cause. And there are good reasons for doing that. And they are also prepared to live with the consequences. And I don’t think this is something we should establish as an ethos. We have to be more modest. There are enough challenges going on already.’ (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

Whilst he argued before that we would have to recognise the media's being an almost equal knowledge producer, the implications this has for him personally seem to be more strongly related to retreating from the area of dispute than to seeking a sociologically informed answer. Hence, in the light of what Arthur said earlier, his approach of dealing practically with the media sounded slightly defensive. Whilst Arthur can see advantages in the role of being a public intellectual, he does not personally seek this role and thinks that there are certain risks involved with taking it up.

To summarise, we have been mainly describing sociologists as office-based people who largely fear communicating with the outside world in ways other than research journal articles or books. Whilst these were themes based on my interviews with sociologists, we would not like this to be misunderstood as portraying an engagement with the public as a straightforward endeavour. Finally, adding to that, Stephen mentions that, according to him, dealing with publics is a very complex matter. He thinks that Burawoy's portrayal of sociologists and the public has not done justice to the complexity that he sees in this relationship. As Stephen outlined with a few examples from his own research experience, interaction with political actors would often be far more complex than publications on the topic of public sociology suggest.

‘There is a lot of proposing of what public sociology might be but little reflection on what it actually means to do public sociology. And that is a complex business. I think Michael Burawoy's piece suffers a little bit from the idea that the public is that homogenous, progressive thing where you just get involved with the public and that leads to some progressive shift. Public sociology does not correspond to that simple,

progressive kind of movement. It is very complex. It involves compromises in writing and in thinking. Tactical interventions, like any other types of politics. And so I become a bit more skeptical of those people who make big speeches about the politics of sociology and that kind of thing. In other places I have thought about it as a kind of hyperpolitical posturing which actually doesn't speak about the complexities of what it means to be involved in these kinds of interventions.' (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

Stephen's comment epitomises the fear that the discourse around public sociology would potentially replicate some of the gaps between theory and practice, creating a new sub-discipline of sociology rather than making sociology more publicly available and relevant. In 'Living Critique' and in 'The Sound of a Lived Discipline' we will discuss in more detail how being public is thought and practised in a rich variety of ways within British sociology.

## 11 Where is Sociology?

What is there to conclude from our analysis in ‘PART II: SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE – REALITIES AND TENSIONS, OR ‘HOW TO SWITCH OFF ONE’S SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN THE UNIVERSITY. A COURSE IN FOUR LECTURES’? Has the sociological imagination indeed been switched off after a four-lecture course on social theory, sociological practice in its institutional framing, sociology’s synthetic character and sociology’s relationship with the public?

We observed frequent shortcomings in how social theory is still thought and written and how this constitutes a betrayal of key elements of sociology – the social and critique. We subsequently analysed how sociological practice is institutionally framed. Many of my respondents themselves acted as critics, arguing against the shortcomings of the RAE and how it stimulated a prioritisation of research at the cost of teaching. In the light of a massive rise of publications and a decline of readership for academic publications on the one hand and the devaluation of teaching on the other, sociology’s original key feature – critique – seems to have become undermined and devalued. We also had a closer look at how synthesis is practised, learning that many sociologists who practise the discipline in a synthetic manner experience prescriptive pressures from their departments, the RAE, funding institutions and journals. Finally, analysing how sociologists relate to the public

sphere, what we found was an office space and a sociologist, with prevailing fears of journalists. Yet, there was another theme that seemed to run through the whole analysis. Within their own surroundings, sociologists often did not seem to be able to critique what they claimed to critique in the outside world. One of my respondents tried to capture this in a very nice way.

‘I think one of the ironies or paradoxes – not just of sociology, but of the humanities – is that those people who are the writers and the listeners are inside the thing they are trying to understand. And like most people they are, to different degrees, strangers to themselves. And I have always thought that the project of sociological practice is not only to think about the way others are caught in worlds that are constructed by ideas and sorts of understandings but equally how the analyst, the writer is caught within that track of being a stranger to oneself.’ (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

Disappointment about our failure as sociologists in living up to the promises of being critical and reflexive in our own surroundings can be found in many of my interviews. For Christopher, academia is a reflection of the inequalities of the outside world. This is even more disappointing for him, as he had believed in the liberating power of sociological analysis for a long time.

‘But I think, over the years, and I hope this isn’t a sign of middle-aged reflection, but over the years I realised that the academy, even sociologists, and Sociology Departments, I am not saying here but anywhere, are characterised by the same inequalities, the same rivalries, the same kind of relations, the same oppressive system that occurs in the world. I think I was very naïve, looking back I was extremely naïve, thinking that I was joining a system that was liberated and that, in turn, was liberating. I think now, and I haven’t just reached this conclusion recently, what we have in the academy is a microcosm of all those oppressive and exploitative relations, all the things I didn’t like before I came into the academy. And that makes me very depressed indeed.’ (*Christopher, 49, lecturer, 60s university*)

The phenomenon of being ‘a stranger to oneself’ became particularly evident in relation to sociologists’ absence in critiquing the changing contexts of Higher Education and the consequences for sociological work. Elizabeth expresses her disappointment with the lack of critical engagement of sociologists with their conditions of work. For her, our absence from these themes makes it even more evident that we compromise our own aspirations as sociologists.

‘I think, for me, my self-understanding as a sociologist links up with certain politics both within the institution and outside. And I would have thought that being a sociologist would give you certain insights into how organisations work and the play of power within organisations. But I am often taken aback. For example, I am a member of the academic trade union and I have been involved in that. But in my previous workplace, less so in this workplace, sociologists rarely attended union meetings. Which I always found surprising. And I also find it surprising that many sociologists have been quite complicit, I am talking about my personal experience in the workplace, with the restructuring of the workplace and the rationalization of universities. I would at least expect sociologists to have an analysis of these kinds of organisational change. But it’s not always the case.’ (*Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university*)

Elizabeth takes our practices as a benchmark against which we have to measure our aspirations as sociologists. According to her, as sociologists we should be in a position to critique these organisational changes by means of our professional expertise in studying organisations. Elizabeth’s concerns about the discipline cannot be taken as mere whispers in an attempt to critique sociology. A brief look at the recent history of Sociology Departments in this country over the last fifteen years indicates that seemingly isolated events of departmental closures add up to a somewhat bigger noise.<sup>81</sup> Yet, the closure of several departments over the last years

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<sup>81</sup> The closure of the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology (CSS) at the University of Birmingham in July 2002 is only the most prominent case (Webster, 2004) out of a series of closures, with sociology in Swansea, amongst others. See

throughout the country happened with hardly any accompanying comments by sociologists.

At the time of writing this thesis, several events further confirmed the hypothesis of academics' hypocrisy. The events at the University of Keele and the threats of redundancy made to employees seem to be unprecedented.<sup>82</sup> The complicit character of an allegedly critical discipline and its inhabitants becomes most apparent when they do not even allow for critical discourse to take place anymore, as became evident when a research session dedicated to a critical and well informed discourse relating to the events in Keele was banned from the BSA conference in Warwick in 2008.<sup>83</sup> It may well be that sociology has lost its critical edge.<sup>84</sup> One of my respondents, Nancy, notes that she no longer has the expectation for Sociology Departments to be enlightened places. Nancy states that the department is a space that reflects all the inequalities of the outside world.

‘Gender is an issue, unfortunately. That is something I have learned to deal with. It is the nature of the team. That is the way it goes. I think that are the dynamics. For me that is an issue especially in terms of career

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[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south\\_west/3556865.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_west/3556865.stm), ‘University backs closure plans’, Tuesday, 23rd March, 2004, [accessed 10 November 08]. Currently, the department in Reading is threatened to be closed. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/berkshire/4535060.stm>, ‘Sociology Department to be closed’, 16th December 2005, [accessed 10 November 08].

82 See <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=3005> ‘Staff redundancy threat at Keele University over closure plans’, 11th December 2007, [accessed 12 December 07].

83 The BSA’s statement on this matter after the BSA conference conveyed the idea that involving itself critically in employment matters would contradict the constitutions of the Association. It is worth noting that the intellectual aspirations of the discipline itself were not taken as a reference point. <http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en&q=Banned+BSA+conference+Keele&btnG=Search&meta=cr%3DcountryUK%7CcountryGB>, ‘Statement on the BSA and external employment matters – the Keele case’, [accessed 10 October 08].

84 The theme of the closure of several departments in the last few years and the reactions of fellow sociologists cannot be followed up within this thesis. Yet, there seems to be a strong need for further systematic inquiries, particularly in the light of the most recent developments.



progression. Perhaps the expectation is that Sociology Departments should be these wonderful, equal, enlightened places and they are not.’  
(Nancy, 45, senior lecturer, new university)

Nancy’s conviction of gender being an analytical category that underpins all areas of social life are reinforced by the realities she is exposed to, experiencing the glass ceiling in academia, as women so often do in a ‘masculine cultural economy where the vast majority of women if they count at all count for less’ (Reay, 2004: 31). Whilst there is a substantial amount of research on the situation of women in academia, black and ethnic-minority women are doubly disadvantaged by their race/ethnicity and gender, as less academic attention is paid to their conditions (Jones, 2006; Wright *et al.*, 2007: 146). In addition to that, a move from Higher Education policies against social injustice to diversity management would further disguise the underlying inequalities that particularly concern black and ethnic-minority female academics (Jones, 2006). The research by Wright *et al.* (2007) focuses on the experience of black women academics in British universities, particularly in the social sciences.. According to data from HESA, out of 12,000 professors, only 0.02% are black. Besides, ‘on the matter of job permanency, relatively few white academic staff are on fixed-term contracts – 39% compared to 42.5% black academic and 65.3% Asian staff’ (HESA, 1999/2000 cited in Wright *et al.*, 2007: 148). Furthermore, non-white female academics are more likely to be employed in new universities that carry lower prestige and opportunities (Puwar, 2000).

Whilst race and ethnicity are important research topics in the UK – next to gender and class – the relative absence of black and ethnic-minority scholars indicates that

research agendas on issues of minority and race are often not set by those who are directly concerned, as Victoria explains. This would also have implications for the research and how it is carried out.

‘Those people who have been involved in the framing of the research, the framing of the agenda are often people who live some of those experiences on the levels of marginality. I am not trying to essentialise here. I am not saying, only black people can research black people. It’s a little bit more nuanced than that. But it helps that people who have taken on those agendas, are not only experiencing it in their heads. But their lives, their embodiment is also about how their identity interfaces with the environment that may be hostile. Whereas I feel that those that have tended to be the experts, those sorts of legitimised knowledge, within the areas of race and ethnicity, and issues of social identity in relation to these topics tend to be people – I am being unkind here – who are voyeuristic actually. In the sense that they can write it down, be abstract about it and it is there in words and text. And when they shut the text they can switch off race. Then they can switch it off. Basically, it’s a career. It’s an academic pursuit. And sociology for me is at its most exciting, yes when you can intellectualise it, when you can theorise it but it is also about using your own lived experience as a parameter, as making some links. And so in terms of people like my self, unfortunately, I can’t just raise social identity and race, for me it’s not just the word as a text that I can close. It is what I am, and it’s not just about me as an individual but it is what I am in terms of my family, my lived experience.’ (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

Victoria talks about the embodiment of the kind of knowledge she produces. For her, the production of knowledge cannot be separated from the person she is. Patricia Hill Collins echoes Victoria’s description of her ‘lived experience’ informing her scholarly work. Hill Collins looks back to her times at university when the engagement with the anti-racism movement had a different meaning compared to her white peers: ‘For me, issues of civil rights and issues of social mobility were life-or-death decisions, whereas for my white friends, they were topics for debate where they could practise analytical thinking’ (Hill Collins, 2005: 101). Whilst this

is not to say that Victoria claims for herself to be outside of the tension of bridging theory and practice, the inequalities she has been experiencing herself make her own research something that has a real shape beyond the paper. As she put it, she can't just 'switch race off'.

The problem of research agendas being set by others is also echoed by South Asian feminist scholars. Whilst South Asian Studies have experienced an enormous surge since the 1980s, 'these are primarily led by established white academics' (Puwar, 2000: 134). Hence, what black, Asian and ethnic-minority academics increasingly experience is a process of being "othered" and being described. Wakeling argues that UK sociology would identify ethnic differences elsewhere but would fail to apply its knowledge to its own surroundings: 'Charges of the hypocrisy are not proven, but neither is the discipline exonerated of myopia concerning its own ethnic composition' (Wakeling, 2007: 945).

For Victoria, it is because of the gap between sociologists' intellectual aspirations and their intellectual and social practices that she cannot separate the discipline as a body of knowledge from the profession.<sup>85</sup> In a similar way, Catherine describes this momentum of 'switching off' for the topic of social class. Coming from a working-class background, Catherine works in an old elite university on the topic of social class and education. What she observes with some of her fellow colleagues is a distance between their research objects and themselves. Given that many of her

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<sup>85</sup> See 'Sociology as a Marginalising Force – Outsiders within Sociology' where Victoria explained why she cannot 'hold the profession in high esteem'.

peers have never even talked to a working-class person in their lives outside a research context, for Catherine a lot of research on social class loses its credibility.

‘But if you are a sociologist who is interested in, I don’t know, social class and inequalities and why working class kids don’t stay on in school after sixteen, then there are quite a few people working on these issues who don’t know any working class kids, have never talked to them, and in real-world terms have no idea about these people they are studying.’  
(Catherine, 28, research fellow, old university)

In fact, as Victoria described previously with regard to race, there is a certain extent to which some people who study social class almost seem to be voyeuristic and detached observers. According to Celine’s observations, sociologists’ social conduct often strikingly deviates from the strong and radical claims they make in their written work.

‘[...] [O]ne of the biggest shocks I found, I learned to accept it now, was people write about really radical things. But they act so differently. You know, they act in very problematic terms. You know they write about race and gender but they replicate certain kinds of thinking that are problematic. [...] So [there is a] gap between what’s on the page and the social interaction they create. [...] Now I am not surprised when I meet people who on the page sound really radical but if you look at how they operate. I mean, the careerism of academia is rife, you know. It’s rife. People are so strategic.’ (Celine, 40, senior lecturer, University of London College)

As Celine explains, sociologists become increasingly careerist and feel forced to make a compromise if they want to progress in the system. This can further be seen in the numerous publications on making an academic career that are also – increasingly – written by sociologists (Blaxter *et al.*, 1998).

Throughout the whole analysis we could see that my respondents' behaviour seems to deviate from the aspirations of the discipline as a whole. The most striking cases, however, are those of the respondents who are aware of it but nevertheless maintain their conduct, with a 'reflexive' mindset. In the light of compromised sociological practice we would finally like to discuss whether being reflexive of one's conditions and potentially one's deficiencies can be seen as a sufficient response. Throughout the interview, Lydia, a young lecturer from a 60s university, has elaborated on her own contradictions of on the one hand wishing to contribute to more knowledge as a sociologist in the public domain, whilst on the other hand having extreme reservations against it. Finally, I would like to challenge Lydia by asking her whom she ultimately produces knowledge for. Her answer to my question is surprisingly open: not only does she admit that she produces knowledge for an academic audience, but she also makes explicit another motivation for doing that, namely, to make herself a name and a career.

'I am producing research for an academic audience that I think people might be interested in reading. Because I want to make my name and want to make a career. [...] It would be ridiculous of me to say I think that it is really important that we communicate widely and that I am doing it because I want my work to reach the public and still find it so difficult to try that. And I think that there are so few sociologists who do step in and communicate with the public and far more who say they do. You have to be consistent in your behaviour.' (*Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university*)

Lydia interprets her own answer as consistent in the sense that she would at least not claim to be contributing to social change any longer. Whilst this can be seen as a very honest answer, it also encompasses some troubling elements. Initially, Lydia was one of those respondents who were especially keen on pointing out sociology's

distinctive and particular role as critic in society as opposed to other disciplines, such as economics.<sup>86</sup> And yet, there is another angle to this twist in argumentation. In recent years, the reflexivity of the researcher with regard to herself and her research has become part of everyday conduct. Even taking the most defeatist attitude towards our own subject and its core principles still seems to be legitimate under the pretense of reflexivity. What needs to be raised is whether the kind of hyper-sensitive posturing about one's failure as a sociologist and the consequent revision of one's professional claims, ultimately ending up in their deletion, is in any way a preferable sociological conduct compared to a complete lack of awareness of one's contradictions. What is left, if we do not put any real effort into reiterating our disciplinary claims as sociologists and start to make a process of collective psychological undressing a new form of critique?

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk developed his thesis of modern cynical reason, providing a direct critique of the enlightenment, but in particular a critique of what he sees as the self-defeating nature of critical theory: 'Critique, in any sense of the word, is experiencing gloomy days. Once again a period of pseudo-critique has begun, in which critical stances are subordinated to professional roles. Criticism with limited liability, petty enlightenment as a factor in success – a stance at the junction of new conformisms and old ambitions. Such a critique realizes that having success is a long way from having an effect. It writes brilliantly but in vain, and that can be heard through everything' (Sloterdijk, 1984: xxxvi). Long before the heyday of the marketisation of Higher Education and its consequences, Sloterdijk seems to

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<sup>86</sup> We met Lydia in 'Critique' in PART I, when we discussed critique as a key element of sociological analysis.

have captured the phenomenon that has become part of our everyday lives in academia, a cynical way of living and approaching the world. In fact, cynicism seems to have replaced critique. Following Sloterdijk, people write a lot but there is no output: 'Because all has become problematic, everything is also somehow a matter of indifference. This thread should be followed. It leads to a place where one can speak of cynicism and 'cynical reason'. To speak of cynicism means to expose a spiritual, a moral scandal to critique; following that, the conditions for the possibility of the scandalous are unraveled' (Sloterdijk, 1984: xxxvi).

This can best be seen with some of my respondents, who seem to consider – whether deliberately or not – reflexivity (or cynicism, as Sloterdijk would call it) the panacea for the loss of critique. The discipline that once claimed to be critical no longer makes a secret out of its failure. In fact, Lydia's admission of working for her career only could be subsumed under the category of reflexivists, for whom the very act of realising and reflecting on one's failure almost counts as a critical and reflexive success and constitutes the endpoint of discourse rather than its beginning: 'Modern cynics are no longer outsiders. Modern cynics are integrated, asocial characters who, on the score of subliminal illusionlessness, are a match for any hippie. It is the stance of people who realize that the times of naïveté are gone. Psychologically, present-day cynics can be understood as borderline melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work. Indeed, this is the essential point in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearers to work – in spite of anything that might happen, and specially, after anything that might happen. For cynics are not dumb (stupid), and every now and then they

certainly see the nothingness to which everything leads. Their psychic apparatus has become elastic enough to incorporate as a survival factor a permanent doubt about their own activities. They know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so. Thus, the new, integrated cynicism even has the understandable feeling about itself of being a victim and of making sacrifices. Behind the capable, collaborative, hard façade, it covers up a mass of offensive unhappiness and the need to cry. In this, there is something of the mourning for a “lost innocence”, of the mourning for better knowledge, against which all action and labour are directed’ (Sloterdijk; 1984: 4ff.).

What tons of Research into Higher Education publications were not able to explain, can now be summarised in a single word: cynicism. At least with this label, extreme displays of empty reflexivity have finally found a more appropriate way of being captured than “critique.” Had this not previously been what sociology was supposed to be about?



## **PART III: Living Sociology**

Finally, this is what is left. My respondents' claims and aspirations and what they had laid out as the key features of sociology were thoroughly tested. Our investigation into sociological practice comprised an analysis of the production of social theory; the dilution of sociological ideas such as the social and critique within sociology; the framing of sociological practice by Higher Education regulations and its consequences; prescriptive pressures against sociology's synthetic character from current assessment modes and from the discipline itself; sociologists' complicity in undermining critique in academia; and finally sociology's constrained way of interacting with publics.

We can call it crisis, we can call it cynicism in the age of post-critique, we may wish to call it careerist times for sociology. Regardless of the label, what we have is the pre-emptedness of a term. Maybe sociology has had it, as one of my respondents put it. As everyone is back in their offices, it rains reptiles. The constant and oblivious crawling of some wet and moody reptilian limbs outside the window evokes a sense of familiarity. There is a spark out there in the sentiment of the shelly reptile: the succinct clarity of a memory emerges in the shape of a giant turtle, sheepishly waving with one leg as it passes. It is as if a childhood scent from our grandmother's house was re-emerging. And yet, we do not know what to do with this dislocated feeling of ideas. Living sociology. Out there.

With open eyes for the reptile, we want to keep rediscovering the sociological. Keeping the chord of sociology alive against the constraints of present realities does not mean taking a defeatist attitude in response to the crisis; nor does it mean ending up in ideology.

‘The renewal of sociology is something that not only entails a change of ideas. It also requires a reconstruction of how sociologists live as well as how they work. What we are involved in here is precisely an effort to contribute to the renewal of sociology, part of a collective effort. Yet, as Marx says, men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing. What we must reckon with is history in all its ‘heaviness’. There is the history of sociology to be reckoned with. There is the history of the societies in which sociology developed. And, yes, there is even our own individual history as persons. All these histories bring us to the watershed of the present. We do not then come to a task without a past. Which is to say, we come to it with both liabilities or limits, on the one side, and assets and opportunities, on the other’ (Gouldner, 1973: 82ff).

‘Living Sociology’ is a tribute to sociologists in this country who still practise sociology and what we had identified as its key features – the social, critique and synthesis. It is the richness of their ways of living ideas against and beyond sociology that we would like to cherish here.

## 12 Sociologists' Claims Revisited

The aspirations my sociologists set out with in the beginning had lost some of their glorious ambience on the way. As became evident in 'Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions', key features of sociological thought – the social, synthesis and critique – have been continually challenged. Here, we would like to think about the implications this has had for sociologists' initial claims. Do alterations in how sociologists approach the discipline necessarily imply the compromising of the discipline's principles, or are changing claims indeed an indication for the lived continuity of these sociological principles? In revisiting the theme of sociologists' aspirations, we would like to look beyond the mere assumption of changing claims to represent a compromising of disciplinary aspirations. This chapter will also be devoted to an exploration of what living with ideas – and, in the course of that, experiencing the life of ideas – means. We will demonstrate that my respondents' aspirations as sociologists need to be revisited from a whole range of perspectives, taking into account biographical events and processes of ageing as well as socioeconomic and political changes in the course of a lifetime. Time changes ideas. Some of my respondents mentioned that over time they had become more open towards approaches that were not labelled as strictly sociological. When they were younger, they found that they were more likely to stick to quite rigid explanations and one particular framework of thought.

'I have got much better as I got older, in the sense that I am less afraid. I think when I was younger, it was important to me to kind of stick to my intellectual baggage, to stick closely to it. In the past across a whole

range of concepts that was important to me, to stick to something. As I moved on a bit or regressed, I find it exciting to think outside of the boxes that I have trapped myself into. I try to do that but equally I have the sense of thinking in a sociological kind of way.’ (*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

Like many other respondents, Annette observed that, becoming older and more mature, she is more open to new approaches and does not feel the need any longer to stick to rigid paradigms that define her as a sociologist. Likewise, Paul describes himself as over the years having become more interested in ideas outside of sociology and no longer being in need of certainty.

‘I think when I was a bit younger, I liked the certitude that the high modernist theorists that were influential within sociology offered me. It offered me clarity and certainty of thinking. As I have kind of gone on, I have become more skeptical of the idea of certainty and more open to ideas other than sociological ones. [...] I lean more towards a kind of post-modern sociology, I think, more post-positivist methodologies and philosophies. The idea of multiple knowledges, the idea of ambivalence that we are often pulled in competing directions between our personal selves and our social selves, between our political views and our roles as academics, and the attempt to kind of balance our work and our home life. [...] There are other ways of understanding the world that are equally valid. And that sociology should not necessarily try and colonise how we should understand the human and the social world. [...] I think I am much more open to things than I would have previously been. This idea of disciplinary boundaries, sometimes it boxes us in. There are two things. One is that I would have been way more dismissive in the past of using ideas and research from outside of sociology, because it wasn’t sociology. And b) I would have been more hesitant to use it, because I didn’t know enough about it, because I didn’t have a background in it. Where I am right now, I think I am much more open, in your words, to a holistic approach, where these are all resources to be used depending on the challenges and problems we are working with. Particular problems demand particular resources. And sometimes these resources are not always readily available within sociology. So we have to look further afield.’ (*Paul, 33, post-doctoral fellow, 60s university*)

Paul's and Annette's narratives suggest that the understanding of what sociology is and could be can change over time. Whilst the approaches they now look into, 'thinking outside the box', as both of them called it, may not be labelled as sociology, it is the way in which they draw on these resources, answering questions on the social, that makes Paul and Annette true sociologists, thinking sociologically beyond the apparently sociological. Following Hannah Arendt, living with and in ideas means that they live in us and change us. This shall lead us constantly to question and potentially revise ideas in the light of what was learned (Arendt, 1971). Hence, changing ideas can also be considered as something very positive, as this process of going beyond ourselves may indicate living up to our enlightenment roots. Analysing Arendt's 'Life of the Mind' for our times, Fine concludes: 'Arendt's reconstruction of the critique of judgement makes a huge contribution to the understanding of the life of the modern mind. Reflective judgement is a vital capacity for political action. It emphasises the importance of making distinctions in a homogenized world [...], of holding onto equivocation where everyone searches for certainty [...]; of daring to make autonomous judgements when all around us have lost their ability to do so [...]; of finding a path between the violent imposition of universal principles and truths and the subjective dissolution of all principle and truth. Arendt offers us good reason, however, not to elevate reflective judgement into an *ideal* faculty of the mind capable of reconciling or synthesizing the oppositions present in the life of the mind as a whole' (Fine, 2008: 169).

In addition to some of my respondents' ideas having changed over time, the assessment of a particular intellectual journey and the location of its starting and end point also depend on sociologists' selective attachment to sociological traditions and their mode of socialisation into the discipline.<sup>87</sup> Paul's and Annette's perception of a radical change of their perspectives can also be seen as an outcome of their socialisation in an environment of sociologists that exercises a more purist understanding of sociology, excluding alternative approaches, as Paul elaborated on. As they said themselves, maturing as people and as sociologists gave them the freedom to move away from a purist understanding of sociology. Hence, what looks like a shift away from a sociological understanding of the world from a sociological purist's point of view, may in fact be the epitome of a sociological momentum. This is when the reptile trots in front of us and we finally know it is our sociology dog. Besides, it could be argued that what Arendt framed as the natural journey, 'the life of the mind,' increasingly happens, if at all, under more severe circumstances. The discipline acts as a prescriptive force on what 'good' and 'bad' sociology is, and on top of that, as discussed throughout this thesis, in an RAE environment, any kind of intellectual development, if it has not previously been endorsed by a managerial body, may not be allowed to come to the surface. As Roberts puts it: '[T]he life of the mind' now exists within the confines of national 'programme specifications' overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency (the QAA). The outcome is that in Britain we have created the equivalent of a national thought police' (Roberts, 2002:

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87 At this point we would like to remind ourselves of the prescriptive functions of the discipline in socialising people into a particular sociological framework, as we discussed in 'Sociological Becomings' and in 'Sociology's Synthetic Character at Risk'.

87). This is to say that one's chances of constructively revising one's views in the course of human and academic life are limited.

So far I discussed the transgression through different stages of life in its potentially leading to more open-mindedness in relation to what sociology is and should be. However, ageing and different stages in the life cycle were also often presented as reasons for diminished disciplinary aspirations. Young age in particular was associated with strong convictions and a belief in radical ideas.

‘It’s still that interest and that sort of commitment to trying to tackle inequality and oppression. And over the years, I had become – I thought about that quite a lot recently – quite jaded, in that I realised that my early ambitions for coming into my career are not realisable, essentially, or may be sort of over-ambitious as I reflect back. Maybe it’s that sort of reflection in the middle age, I don’t know.’ (*Christopher, 49, lecturer, 60s university*)

In the light of his partly failed sociological endeavours, Christopher reconstructs the meaning of his early ambitions. This slightly defeatist way of relating to his initial aspirations as a sociologist can be considered as a coping mechanism for his partial failures in living up to the calling of sociology. The idea that sociologists’ approach to their work changes over a life time is sufficiently documented in collections of sociologists’ autobiographical accounts (Sica and Turner, 2005) or sociologists’ biographies (Horowitz, 1970b). One of the most common themes they mention is that the process of ageing brings about a weaker belief in strong convictions and certainties, as Paul explained above. In ‘Practising Social Theory: The Loss of the Social’ we already encountered Barbara and her diagnosis of ‘a dearth of the political out there with the decline of the left’. As she got older, Barbara became

aware of her own limitations and questioned the certainty she had in approaching theories at a younger age. Whilst Barbara saw the reasons for the decline of the left in a rise of so-called identity politics in sociology, at the same time she explained her own sympathies for psychoanalysis as a byproduct of getting older. Whilst she describes her thought as informed by Marxist ideas, she explains that the ideals she believed in when she was younger seemed to have lost a bit of the certainty they had given her in the past.

‘There is a vocational calling in the sense of just wanting to be helpful. When I was younger, I always had this sense of wanting to tell people who are really up against it and suffering, look, this is not just about you. To paint them a bigger picture that sociology gives people rather than to psychologise whatever it was they were experiencing. And I am still quite motivated in that way, although I think, as I remarked earlier, the more I become aware of my own limitations, the more I am aware of the futility of that consciousness raising, I can’t think of another way of putting it. And in a sense, is it my right to do that anyway? I have a lot of questions that maybe I didn’t have when I was younger. I just assumed it was the right thing to do.’ (*Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic*)

We can see with Barbara’s case that both external changes, such as the decline of the left, and the process of ageing have made her question her previously strong belief in the sociological ideals of her youth. Over the last few decades alone, the social sciences and humanities have gone through substantial changes with the end of the grand narratives, the cultural turn and the rise of post-modernity. In the course of that, a lot of sociology’s initial claims of making contributions to social change have been weakened. A stronger emphasis on the individual as a unit of analysis, entwined with a decline of radical ideas in sociology, the conviction of sociology and its transformative potentials for society being less widespread, the decline of



academic activism – all of these developments can be seen as a reflection of a trend towards de-politicisation in society more generally. Gitlin considers sociologists' declining presence as a 'live political and intellectual force,' as a reflection of the general weakening of ideals 'that were traditionally the preserves of the Left' (Gitlin, 1994: 150). Gitlin further remarks that this decline of activism is also related to increasing specialisation in universities and the intellectual work that is carried out on behalf of special groups, thereby sometimes putting broader concerns that may underpin social structures across various groups in the background (Gitlin, 1994).

My respondents' reactions to these developments in sociology towards a stronger focus on the individual and identity politics are varied. Some of my respondents name sociology's increasing detachment from politics as a reason for their own distancing from sociology. In answer to my question, Martin, a lecturer in a London University, understands post-modern sociology as a kind of sociology that is slightly detached from a material understanding of the world that pays attention to social structures. Martin feels so betrayed by the subject that he does not want to identify as a sociologist any longer. Besides, Martin states that the kind of sociology he feels close to is not carried out in Sociology Departments any longer, but in departments for social policy or education.

Whilst Christopher is equally depressed about the state of sociology, he still feels committed to social transformation. Yet, the complicity of academics on the one hand and the failure of the big social movements on the other hand have made him

distance himself from the grand narratives. As he points out, the most depressing aspect is to see how Marxists completely betray their own thoughts in their practice.

‘I think that two things have happened. One thing is that things that I have said to you about my feelings about the academy and the way that I have personally felt about oppression and exploitation in the academy and so on has made me reflect back upon that and I wouldn’t be aligning myself to those positions now because, to be honest, I have also thought that some of the most prominent academic Marxists are some of those who are most prominent in keeping this corrupt system going. That’s a great irony! But you know, I think it’s the whole thing, it is very hypocritical, if you like. So on the personal and political level, that was the personal shift out of those perspectives. And it has also meant to shift with aligning myself with any school.’ (*Christopher, 49, lecturer, 60s university*)

According to Christopher, sociology has betrayed itself. The realities of the academy and the de-politicised conduct of the profession would have changed his approach to his professional aspirations, but also to theoretical approaches that claim to be radical but do not live up to their objectives. What this causes amongst this subset of my respondents is a feeling of betrayal and a sense of realisation that sociologists do not distinguish themselves from other groups in society. Yet, these moments of grief on sociology’s missed opportunities do not seem to be as widespread as initially assumed. Rather, the larger part of my respondents seems to consider the changes within sociology, as well as their own revised aspirations, as an almost inevitable outcome of an era, in which big claims can no longer be upheld and become the deviant rather than the desirable.

‘[...] [T]hat ethos that I described from the seventies is probably less and less the case. The equation of sociology with socialism which has been made by many people...is less of an issue. And it was less of an issue if you look at the United States. They try to be neutral and give a scientific

analysis of things. So anyone who was a Parsonian at that time would say that's nonsense you can't be partisan to a political project. To some extent this is also true today because you have this sort of professional ethos and people don't want to be associated easily with political current. Which also can be very dangerous, but in my view it is also part of a wider shift in orientation that sociologists have become disillusioned with many things like other people. Sociologists are committed to equality, i.e. socialism. Maybe you can agree with equality but not with socialism. And what does it mean, is it New Labour, is it more radical? And then you are not different to anyone in society.' (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

The rhetoric that comes along with narratives like Arthur's suggests that sociologists' change claims to be an almost inevitable outcome of wider developments in society. In framing sociology as a mirror of the outside world, Arthur does not view his revised claims as compromising his initial ambitions. This kind of standpoint implies that sociologists' changing claims are nothing to be deplored and not anything that stands in contrast to earlier ambitions.

As we could demonstrate in this chapter, intellectual aspirations may be subject to change and can shift substantially due to personal developments and different stages in life, and changes in the political and social surroundings. While we may deplore the seemingly collective forgetting of early disciplinary aspirations and the less than apologetic recognition of this fact, acknowledging the constructive possibility of changing aspirations and viewpoints is equally essential, so as not to mistake sociology a rigid body of knowledge that calls for a dogmatic style of behaviour. Intellectual journeys are important. Critiquing our own viewpoints and being able to revise them are the flesh and blood of a discipline that is based on Enlightenment values: *sapere aude!* Dare to know! Whilst sociologists' changing views could be viewed as a necessary component of rich intellectual life, what we could see in most

of my respondents did not often resemble a fulfilled 'life of the mind'. Rather, many of my interviewees' intellectual journeys embodied a detachment from what we see as sociology, with open defeat or disguised cocooning as endpoints instead of refreshed viewpoints; as results of lived sociology that comes true to its core moments.

## 13 Living Synthesis

In ‘Living Synthesis’ we revisit one of sociology’s key features – synthesis, or as some of my respondents called it, intellectual permeability. In ‘Living Synthesis: Transforming Sociology from Within and Outside’, we will discuss sociologists’ experience of being marginalised within the discipline, both on a material as well as on an intellectual level. By critiquing sociology and bringing in new perspectives, they truly contribute to a synthetic moment in sociology and thereby keep transforming the discipline – from within and outside. Then, in ‘Out and About With Classic Social Theory and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Friends’ some of my respondents will report on their ways of living sociology in a new way, revisiting classical social theory in the light of changing times and connecting with contemporary issues and theories.

### **13.1 *Living Synthesis: Transforming Sociology from Within and Outside***

This part of the chapter will be devoted to those respondents of mine whose work has been marginalised within sociology and whose efforts to counter these marginalisations both in an intellectual as well as a material sense can be seen as an example of the transformation of sociology from within and outside, and thus of the lived continuation of sociological core moments – synthesis and critique. Based on my respondents’ narratives, in ‘Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions’, we

discussed the fact that whilst the importance of race and gender in sociology has been acknowledged over the last decades, very often their role as key analytical categories in social theory still remains underemphasised. We had discussed how this has been deeply ingrained into sociology both on an intellectual level – such as in social theory – and on a material level by the marginalisation of researchers in academia who had challenged these ‘omissions’. Finally, these sociologists strike back by rewriting social theory, by teaching sociology differently or by contributing to critical discourse in the wider public domain.<sup>88</sup> In the following, we would like to follow some of these respondents in order to learn how they have been writing, teaching and working within and outside of sociology, often against the pressures of the discipline, but yet making an incredibly significant contribution.

In response to my question of whether she sees any ethical or political responsibilities arising out of her sociological activity, Janet says that she considers it her task to uncover hidden histories and hidden lives.

‘In terms of what do I see as my task, again I have this ethical and political responsibility: wanting to contribute to particular intellectual and hopefully wider debates as well, in different ways. I think, for me, women’s lives essentially have been so hidden in history in lots of ways. That has been a real feminist project in recent decades. I feel just like documenting women’s lives and men’s as well [...] Just about contributing to uncovering kind of hidden histories and hidden lives. And that certainly has a strong feminist tradition of doing.’ (*Janet, 31, research fellow, 60s university*)

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<sup>88</sup> Employing the notion of ‘striking back,’ we are mindful of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ oeuvre ‘The empire strikes back: race and racism in 70s Britain’ in the 1980s (Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982).

Janet's commitment to documenting women's lives and providing alternative views can be taken as a manifestation of sociologists' claim to contribute to social change. Referring to C. Wright Mills' work, Stevi Jackson argues that feminist sociology can be seen as sociological imagination applied to the discipline itself. Jackson suggests that there is 'convergence between the feminist conviction that the personal is political and C. Wright Mills' famous claim that the sociological imagination transforms 'personal troubles' into 'public issues'' (Jackson, 1999: 7.1). By applying the sociological imagination to sociology itself, one could further argue that feminists have made their seemingly 'personal troubles' of the exclusion of feminist epistemology and knowledge within sociology into a 'public issue' within the field.<sup>89</sup> In a similar vein, one of my respondents, Jane, pays tribute to the success of feminist sociology as the epitome for the link between an intellectual and a political project.

'That has been the kind of feminist tradition for such a long time. And it has been an enormously transformative one within sociology. And we really can't underestimate the impact that it has had. It has been absolutely tremendous, and incredibly exciting and invigorating and important, intellectually, epistemologically and politically. I mean, I think it hasn't been as influential as it should be for a lot of mainstream sociology.' (*Janet, 31, research fellow, 60s university*)

Whilst gender has been implemented as an analytical category in some social theory books, Victoria deplores that race and ethnicity have not been given due attention.

'There is a degree of cynicism, because you are right: unlike in gender...where there is an attempt to rewrite things, I think in my area of

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<sup>89</sup> In this context, we would also like to keep in mind our discussion about feminist theory's partial omission of a material dimension in expressing the social, as documented in 'Practising Social Theory: The Selective Interpretation of the Social'.

race there is very little that needs to be done. Because indeed the students are asking: are there no black people? Where are the black authors in this, the black voices? Because I go to A-level conventions. And it is amazing how students are now becoming more demanding and critical now. So that's with respect to my teaching.' (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

The driving force that keeps her motivated in collecting alternative voices and presenting these narratives are her students. Victoria wants to teach social theory in a different way. As she explains, her aim is to demonstrate to students that the body of knowledge that they receive is only an extract of what is out there. For Victoria, her disciplinary aspiration of being critical unfolds in her teaching, where she wants the students to develop a critical attitude towards the knowledge that is presented to them:

'In terms of my teaching, it shapes how I go out to select material. And in the sense that the teaching itself should be critical, engaging and the rest of it. Encouraging students to be skeptical, critical of what they are receiving in terms of body of knowledge. However, in addition to that expectation, for me it is about trying to present the students with a body of knowledge which is not traditionally expected. [...] I would go out and make a point of finding out how Fanon as a black scholar has contributed to sociological thinking. When I talk about Chicago School, we remember Park's contribution to migration. Hang on, before Park did that, there were black writers looking at these very same issues! It is trying to locate another narrative and it is not always easy to do. Because some of these narratives are not necessarily written in the traditional sociological form. In terms of ethnicity, thinking on race and situations. Sometimes it is citing historical sources that have been written by non-white authors. That's what I am trying to do in my teaching.' (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

Hence, Victoria's efforts of teaching these writers are a struggle against the forces of forgetting. As for her, having experienced exclusion and discrimination as a black woman, race and ethnicity are not just mere words. It is because of this intertwining



of experience and intellectual work that social theory is therefore not just a word for Victoria as she mentions. It is an experience. Describing herself as an ‘activist masquerading as an intellectual’, Victoria’s work can very much be seen in the tradition of Hill Collins. Victoria emphasises that as academics we have to make use of our privilege of creating knowledge. Yet, in an era where so much emphasis is put on research and administration, Victoria finds it increasingly difficult to find the time to produce these alternative voices and narratives to encounter common discourses that are seen as the legitimate form of knowledge. This increases her degree of frustration.

‘But it’s not always easy because it means that I have to investigate and to do research on material. I don’t always achieve that. I don’t always accomplish that. That’s what I am desperately trying to do. It is getting harder and harder as I get older and have greater demands. And this is one of the reasons – I haven’t thought about it yet. But you help me to understand now why I have become frustrated with some of my teaching. And part of it is that I don’t have the time and enthusiasm anymore to search out these alternative narratives. I just don’t have the time. And therefore I get tired of sharing with students of what is the legitimate, recognised text on a given topic. So you have helped me to reflect on that.’ (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

As she realises herself, it is for this reason that she is frustrated with her teaching. With Victoria, we illustrated a respondent whose efforts for a transformation of sociology are made by providing alternative narratives of social theory in her teaching. As we could see in this chapter, the scenes of struggle for transforming sociology from within and outside are diverse. Synthesis and critique are enacted in various intellectual and social spaces. It is the marginalised within sociology with whom we witness the coming to life of sociology’s key features, against and ultimately for the discipline.

### **13.2 *Living Synthesis: Out and About With Classical Social Theory and 21st Century Friends***

In ‘Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions’ we experienced the compromising of features that are intrinsic to sociological thought – critique, the social and synthesis. On the level of social theory we pointed out that gender, ethnicity, race and post-colonialism had been persistently neglected as analytical categories whilst universal validity was claimed. In response to this, the previous chapter, ‘Living Synthesis: Transforming Sociology from Within and Outside’ was devoted to a discussion of how these shortcomings are encountered by some of my respondents by integrating notions of difference into their work, both in their writing and in their teaching. Yet, the question of whether and how we can revisit the classics still needs to be asked in the light of these fundamental gaps that have been overlooked by predominantly white, male and middle-class sociologists for centuries.

First and foremost, this takes us to the question of how the classics can be defined. Coming from literary theory, Italo Calvino presents the classics as books that are always worth reading again. According to Calvino ‘a classic is a work which persists as background noise even when a present that is totally incompatible with it holds sway’ (Calvino, 1999: 8). Rather than approaching them like a museum piece, Calvino suggests taking the classics as a source for critical engagement: “‘Your’ classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it’ (Calvino, 1999: 7). Almost echoing

Calvino's words, Hayley emphasises how the classics can help us understand current themes in a new light and in combination with contemporary writings.

'The work that inspires me most and gives me ideas when I am stuck with my writing – I don't go and pick up sociology. I go and pick up something outside of sociology. I pick up work from Judith Butler. Some contemporary psychoanalysis. I have also been going back to the classics. I have been reading a lot of Elias recently, and Simmel, and finding an awful lot there that is of interest in the relationship of the individual and the social. And how constructions of the individual change, and groups. This sounds awfully pompous. So I have a lot of interest in classical sociological issues about social change, the individual and the social. But the way I am tackling them is through lenses that come from outside sociology. At the moment, if I had to identify myself very strongly with a sociologist it would probably be with Elias, as a sort of classical sociologist. He has this fundamental interest in theorising social change and a more similar ontological perspective to the one I am taking, although not really any interest in gender and sexuality and in terms of the actual topic, not much relationship.' (*Hayley, professor, 42, red-brick university*)

Hence, for Hayley, it is reading the classics jointly with contemporary theories that makes the analytical power of classic key concepts in contemporary times visible. Calvino further reminds us of reading the classics with a forward-looking mind: 'The contemporary world may be banal and stultifying, but it is always the context in which we have to place ourselves to look either backwards or forwards. In order to read the classics, you have to establish where exactly you are reading them 'from', otherwise both the reader and the text tend to drift in a timeless haze. So what we can say is that the person who derives maximum benefit from a reading of the classics is the one who skillfully alternates classic readings with calibrated doses of contemporary material. And this does not necessarily presuppose someone with a harmonious inner calm: it could also be the result of an impatient, nervy temperament, of someone constantly irritated and dissatisfied' (Calvino, 1999: 8).

The most fruitful encounters happen where we sense some kind of resistance, as one of my respondents, Celine, describes with regard to her critical readings of classic social theory.

‘I think it [sociology] is a very powerful discipline and it should stop being defensive. And it should teach itself to live in the history of the discipline, to appreciate the life world of the discipline. What it has come out of. We know, Industrial Revolution and so on, how many times are you going to get that. But you know, there is this whole global thing going on, now, then, whenever it was. And the thought of sociology, the social thought of sociology, was produced in certain moments of time – and what about placing them in time a bit? I mean more than European time, in different times. And to do that without being scared that it’s going to kill the discipline. If you are scared, it’s going to already build castles and camps. And it is a really powerful discipline. The books we have got, the classic books...make you think a lot and they affect you a lot. But we shouldn’t allow it to stop us from expanding. It doesn’t mean – well, we used to read Marx, Weber, Durkheim, weren’t we – and some Simmel, I think that’s fine, you can teach that canon. But let’s teach it a little bit differently. We can still appreciate it, criticise it. But let’s have some context because I think it stops a lot of people connecting with it. It does appear as white, European men because of the way it is given to us. And I am not saying that these men, not even Bourdieu that it is purely beyond critique. I am sure there are some elements of orientalism in his work. But I am not scared of that. I can still work with him. I mean if you like, feminists, if you have problems with their work, it doesn’t mean that you don’t work with them. You know that whole thing that they worked with Freud even though there are quite sexist tendencies in his work. I hope that it [sociology] is able to do that with its so-called godfathers and godmothers.’ (Celine, 40, senior lecturer, University of London College)

It is important to remind ourselves of the ‘baking of these theories,’ as Celine puts it. Celine suggests that by reinterpreting social theory in the light of its making, we could contextualise it in a better way. Building on Bhambra’s work on the post-colonial sociological imagination (Bhambra, 2007), we discussed the necessity of re-thinking social theory in the light of its historical context and the conditions of its production in ‘Practising Social Theory: The Exclusion of Gender, Race and Post-

Colonialism'. Celine further remarks that reading the classics invites us to view them in a slightly different way, outside merely European times. This argument, and in particular Celine's comment, on reviewing the Industrial Revolution in a new light for sociologists, inscribing a post-colonial perspective into the making of social theory, paralleled the starting point for Bhambra's comprehensive elaborations on re-thinking modernity in the light of its post-colonial past (Bhambra, 2007). This also resonates with Connell's work on the need for a globalised social theory, particularly paying tribute to the undervalued global south (Connell, 2007).

Celine explains a lot of people's reluctance to engage with the classics by social theory mostly having disregarded gender, class and race as underlying analytical categories. Yet, whilst she agrees with these arguments, she mentions that this should nevertheless not be taken as a pretext for discarding classic social theory altogether. By learning to live in the history of the discipline, Celine suggests treating the treasure of social theory as a fruitful resource that can be brought together with other bodies of knowledge. This reminds us of Steven Seidman's carefully written social theory collection, in which he rethinks classical social theory from today's perspective, paying attention to its being treated as contested knowledge (Seidman, 2008). It is in this moment of joining different sources that we can best see synthesis and critique being renewed, and thus sociology being continued.

Celine's argument also resonates with what Merton wrote about reading the classics as serving as good training for our critical skills (Merton, 1967). It is by reading the

classics as something other than a museum piece that we would be able to refine our skills of critique: ‘There is much to be said for the re-reading of older works – particularly in an imperfectly consolidated discipline such as sociology – providing that this study consists of something more than that thoughtless mimicry through which mediocrity expresses its tribute to greatness. Re-reading an older work through new spectacles allows contemporary sociologists to find fresh perceptions that were blurred in the course of firsthand research and, as a result, to consolidate the old, half-formed insight with newly developing inquiry’ (Merton, 1967: 37).

Scott argues that an outward-looking sociology is a sociology that lives out of its traditions (Scott, 2005a). He points out that sociology is in and of itself interdisciplinary, since interdisciplinarity – or, as we put it, intellectual permeability or synthetic orientation – is already inscribed into classic social theory. Scott’s argument is a response to John Urry’s accusation of Scott’s perception of sociology resulting in a closed sociology cabinet. Scott outlines five fallacies in Urry’s critique of disciplinary sociology: 1) isolationism and disciplinary closure; 2) nationalism and national closure; 3) purism and material closure; 4) cognitivism and emotional closure; 5) privatism and political closure. For Scott, practising interdisciplinarity that arises out of the sociological traditions also requires a stronger awareness of the sociological classics and the ideas of synthesis that are embedded in them. The spirit of Scott’s argument about the importance of the classics in leading us the path to rich and intellectually permeable work in the present can be traced in George’s commentary. George works in a department where he does not experience any

policing of disciplinary boundaries. To his mind, the synthetic character of the discipline thereby fully comes to life.

‘I think there is that wonderful sense of the synthetic that you have as a sociologist. It is entirely appropriate to draw on any resource. There is no policing of disciplinary boundaries if you are a sociologist. There has to be a sociology of anything that engages human interest or action. You can develop a sociological perspective on everything. It is extremely rewarding to do so. So, I think that is probably the most valuable thing. There is nothing that you might be interested in that couldn’t be a valuable and a viable resource for sociology. This is what I find the most engaging. And it is about what is going on. Not what has gone on, although history is very important for sociology. I can’t see how it couldn’t be relevant. And it emerges as an idea and as a practice out of that crucial period of a transition from early to late modernity – the end of the eighteenth century, with the work of Condorcet and Quetelet and then those extraordinary two generations of theorising, with Marx and Comte initially, and then consolidated by Durkheim and Weber. And then Simmel and Pareto, which is the classical tradition, that ends with Parsons. Brilliant attempted synthesis, much neglected. [...] This department is half non-sociologists – but they don’t lack sociological imagination – they are all...more than happy to be in a Sociology Department. It gives them the freedom they wouldn’t have – one of my younger colleagues is a philosopher, another one is coming from legal studies. They tell me this all the time, the freedom they have in this department, they would not have, were they in a philosophy department, in a law department, in an anthropology department. [...] I think it [the idea of synthesis] is probably better developed here than anywhere else I know – it is a more eclectic range. But what I was referring to as the post-modern crisis is this lack of the sense of what is the very rich tradition of social theory, sociological thought. The problem is that classical sociological thought is not taught properly anymore.’  
(George, 64, senior lecturer, University of London College)

Whilst half of the department is staffed by non-sociologists, their exercise of the idea of synthesis makes them true sociologists. George’s narrative indicates that institutional interpretations of how the idea of synthesis is lived can differ substantially. As we discussed in ‘Social Theory as Sociological Practice’, what

counts as the classics and is perceived as a canon is not necessarily a comprehensive reflection of all the important contributions made by sociologists in a particular field. Calvino's answer to the question of how a classic can be defined highlights that what we are concerned with as the canon of classic social theory is a selective part of it and is partly socially constructed by the reader: 'All that can be done is for each one of us to invent our own ideal library of our classics; and I would say that one half of it should consist of books we have read and that have meant something for us, and the other half of books which we intend to read and which we suppose might mean something to us. We should also leave a section of empty spaces for surprises and chance discoveries' (Calvino, 1999: 9). This is an invitation to put more energy into redefining the classics in social theory, as discussed in 'Transforming sociology from within'. In promoting openness on what counts as a classic, Calvino does not, however, take into account the unequally distributed powers within a discipline in defining a canon and its contents. Rather, what is needed, as some of my respondents emphasised in 'Living Synthesis: Transforming Sociology from Within and Outside,' and as has been stated by others (Delamont, 2003), is to structurally write authors that have been left out from the 'official' history of sociology back into it and to reinstate their importance.



## 14 Living Critique

Throughout this thesis we discussed critical inquiry as one of sociology's key features. Yet, as we could see in 'Sociological Practice - Realities and Tensions', the use of the concept of critique seems to have become inflationary, increasingly emptied and decidedly shallow as a notion. Some people have even been speaking of the age of post-critique. Following Calhoun, in the light of this it seems to get increasingly difficult to determine the actual meaning of critique (Calhoun, 1995). Against this background, it is even more important for us to ponder on what living critique may entail. What is the production of critical values about? Giving the voice again to my respondents, their attention will centre around two particular ways in which critique can manifest itself: first of all, educating students at university and teaching them to question what is normally taken for granted; secondly, living sociology beyond the walls of the university. We will illustrate this with my respondents' various ways of engaging with publics and their contribution to critical discourse.

### **14.1 *On the Cultivation of Critique: Educating the Next Generation***

Much has been written about research and its Big Brother, the RAE, as well as about teaching being devalued. Yet, little has been said about the implications this

devaluation of teaching has for sociology as a discipline and the loss of potential for sociology that comes along with this devaluation. As it is by conveying critical thinking – the ‘skills’ to question – to future generations that sociology could be at its best in implementing critique in society. We have ticked the box of deploring and diagnosing the downfall. Now it is time to pay more attention to the spaces in which we can cultivate critique with maximum effect.

Whilst my respondents regarded teaching and research as the most important ways of practising sociology, they emphasised teaching in particular as a way of putting the critical disciplinary traditions into practise. Yet, the stress on teaching as a key way of living critique is not reflected in the institutional rewards for teaching in current Higher Education. In ‘Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions’ Lydia elaborated on current sociological identity being centred around research. Now, Lydia specifies that for her, part of being a good sociologist is to teach well and to think about teaching as much as about research. Whilst she can be considered a well-published rising star, she admits that what really re-assures her in her aspirations as a sociologist is teaching.

‘I think the only place through which we can really have a positive impact on people’s lives is how we speak to our students and how we teach our students and what we give to them to take away. So I feel quite strongly that part of being a good sociologist is to teach well and to think about teaching as much as you think about your research.’ (*Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university*)

The realities of knowledge production that prioritise research seem to challenge my respondents’ aspirations in entering the field of sociology. For Christopher, the

driving force to come to sociology was his commitment to social and political change. Whilst he had hoped for his research endeavours to contribute towards these aims, the realities of the RAE and the devaluation of teaching made him question the framing of research as the only avenue through which he could pursue his disciplinary aspirations. In the light of these developments in Higher Education, teaching is the only commitment that remains for him as a sociologist:

‘I think the thing that remains for me within the academy, on a political level, are the students and the commitment to the students. And wanting to see young people do well and develop some of the understandings that I have been exposed to. They don’t need to agree with me, of course, but reading and trying to understand and to form their own views and critique. That goal is still there with me and really hasn’t become jaded. Despite what I have said to you about the profile of students changing. It is still there and I would say that my commitment to – it sounds arrogant, so please forgive me – but my commitment to students is the one commitment that remains. And, for the academy, I am dispirited with the academy, if you like. I would put my allegiance with the students rather than with the academics’. (*Christopher, 49, lecturer, 60s university*)

For a lot of my respondents, teaching is perceived as the last realm of academic activity that does not seem to be futile. Providing students with the skills to think critically for themselves is experienced as a rewarding activity, in spite of a lack of appropriate material recognition across all institutions. These responses also feed in with recent research across other disciplines (Hannan and Silver, 2000; Young, 2006). Notwithstanding the systematic devaluation of teaching, these studies on academics and their relationship with teaching and research suggest that many academics remain committed to teaching. One of the most striking points mentioned by many of my respondents across all institutions concerned the audiences they can

reach in the lecture theatre. It is with teaching that she can reach beyond the computer screen, Elizabeth says.

‘It is in teaching that you feel that your work can have some kind of impact beyond you and the computer screen and you and the page. Again we might come back to this later, but I believe in academic scholarship, and I read academic scholarship and I produce it. But I do think part of the changing culture, the RAE culture has been to give this weight to what is called “research,” which often is just writing. That overstates its importance and certainly its impact, its wider impact. Whereas with teaching – and it comes out of my own experience – going to university changed my life and gave me opportunities that I would never have had otherwise. And I think that’s the case with the students that I have taught, particularly at X. Here it is a more privileged group of students. But the students at X, a lot of their experience was similar to mine, the first people of their family to go to university. Being able to engage with people in that way is potentially empowering for them and rewarding for you. They go into sociology with big ideas. They want to understand how society works and they want to make changes in society. And then they tend to come towards the end of their degree and feel depressed about the possibility of doing that. Because sociology is a fairly critical discipline. It can help students to realise about the sheer ways of power and how difficult it is to make changes. But I think the experience of education is such an important one and that is where I see the real impact happening.’ (*Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university*)

Looking back to her own university education, Elizabeth appreciates the critical thinking she gained from going to university. Likewise, for Stephen, the preoccupation with knowledge and the opportunity to think otherwise were the most important and liberating experiences.

‘I think, to me being a sociologist, it is a matter of taking teaching seriously. It is important in my mind. The kind of dialogue and the spaces of thinking that can be made possible, however damaged and fraught and subject to external pressures that can happen in the university lecture room or the seminar. To me, in my experience, coming to university, was such a mind-opening experience. To think otherwise, to be allowed. To be allowed to think. To be wrong. To say outrageous things and then to think, ah that’s rubbish what I have just said. To

reflect. And the importance of thinking in and of itself, and trying to create an environment where thinking in and of itself can happen that relates to the issues of the day and to the experiences of the people in the classroom. I think that is the task of what sociology should be about. Facilitating that. Not only in the university seminar, in the lecture theatre. It is also about going out into other environments.’ (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

Looking back to his university socialisation with gratitude, Stephen would like to create circumstances where knowledge is taken as a value and students can experience the liberating power of ideas in the same way he did. It is in teaching, in which we promote the relentless questioning of knowledge, that we have to perform our intellectual roots at its best. All of this also resonates with Michael Burawoy’s call for sociologists to consider students as the first public that they need to address. Burawoy emphasises the necessity to see the challenges of the mass university in a new light (Burawoy, 2005). The argument of purveying critical thinking through teaching can be further substantiated in the light of the widening of Higher Education and increasingly diversified student populations. In particular, respondents from post-1992 universities reported on their encounters with students from more deprived backgrounds as a particularly rewarding experience. Yet, beyond the argument of reaching beyond the page and reaching more diversified student audiences, George argues that one of sociologists’ biggest privileges and responsibilities is to teach the next generation and thus have an impact on society.

‘One obviously is teaching. I don’t mean it to sound pompous. There is a privilege involved in teaching. You have access to young people you will have major influence on their generation. It is a remarkable opportunity to engage with the most able people of a generation. The inadequate resources. Teaching is very important. And I enjoy teaching.’ (*George, 64, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

If sociology aims to contribute to social change and fight discrimination, then conveying critical skills to student audiences and educating the next generation is a good place to start. The extent to which critique features at the forefront of sociology became clear when I asked my respondents what they considered as the most important thing to bring across to students: critique.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, what makes Victoria feel positive is that, through her teaching, future leaders in society are exposed to knowledge that may make them question things. As she further explains, on top of the sociological knowledge she conveys, for many of them, her presence as a black professor is probably one of the only occasions when they will meet someone non-white in education.

‘One of the things that universities do...is that as you know, universities act as a rite of passage. Most of those who end up being leaders of our institutions, leaders in society generally speaking, would have gone through university as a socializing institution. There is a sense in which being here as a black academic and through the content that I teach, a side of me tells me that I am doing something that needs to be done, that’s lauding. In the sense that I am exposing future leaders, not necessarily here but in previous institutions, to an individual that doesn’t look like them, being a black person, a black woman. And for many of them, they say [that] they wouldn’t have encountered in a working relationship people that are non-white. So having the opportunity to have a rapport with, to engage with and then likewise in itself, is a useful thing. That is necessary, right and proper. However, there is a side of me which is somewhat disillusioned and disappointed that over these years I don’t have in front of me futures of our society, many anyway, that are non-white, that I have the privilege of sharing a space with, the privilege of encountering and the privilege of mentoring. So that is another aspect of my teaching that I find really dispiriting.’ (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

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<sup>90</sup> This is indeed a very powerful theme that was confirmed in another study, related to this doctoral research, in which the author carried out 25 qualitative interviews in a 60s university Sociology Department on sociologists’ relationship with teaching and research. The results of this research were presented jointly with a Cath Lambert-curated exhibition entitled ‘Sociologists Talking’ within the BSA Annual Conference 2008, University of Warwick.

The fact that after thirty years in academia she still does not have the chance to teach more black students and to be their mentor makes Victoria very depressed.<sup>91</sup>

In the light of so many of my respondents having emphasised the significance of teaching in their sociological lives, it nevertheless remains unclear why academics, and sociologists in particular, silently accept the devaluation of teaching. One way of giving teaching the significance it deserves as a way of putting the disciplinary aspirations of critique into practice would be to reflect its value in adequate institutional rewards, comparable to the credits academics get for research. As Gibbs suggests, this could be achieved by implementing the peer review of teaching (Gibbs, 1995). Irrespective of the problems that may arise from attempting to measure 'good teaching', strategies for the enhancement of the status of teaching that disregard research may further segregate what Humboldt once envisioned as a unit. Initiatives such as the foundation of 74 HEFCE-funded Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) can be seen as an institutionalised incentive for thinking and living research and teaching in relation to each other (Lambert *et al.*, 2007). Following their critical ambitions, sociologists should be particularly drawn to develop this relationship further and to see the university as the first space where their aspirations can jointly unfold in their thinking, their pedagogies and their writing.

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91 In fact, relating to our earlier comment on sociologists reaching a wider audience of students in the course of the massification of universities and campaigns of widening participation, Victoria's comment points us to the fact that indeed, students from non-white backgrounds, in particular black students, are still grossly under-represented at university.

## **14.2 On Communicating Critique: Being a Public Intellectual**

We have followed Christopher throughout this whole thesis. We know that he is depressed about the course of events in the discipline. According to Christopher, a revolution is needed in sociology.

‘I would like a revolution in the discipline. I would like sociology to be a discipline of public intellectuals. And to be engaged with current social and political issues and social problems rather than with the nuances and intricacies of sociological theory.’ (*Christopher, 49, lecturer, 60s university*)

Yet, opinions about what exactly this revolution within sociology should involve are divided. Burawoy’s calling for ‘public sociology’ is in our ears. Whilst equally promoting a stronger engagement with the public, we argued that we need to be careful not to confine the conception of what counts as public to particular activities. Rather, as we have been showing throughout this study, critique can be practised in very different formats.

‘I don’t think it necessarily has to be a kind of activism that there is academia and activism, I kind of object to that. I see what I do as a kind of activism, in that there is work to be done within the intellectual, the academic community, the feminist community about what I think the issues are, what I think has been overlooked. And asking those questions, you know, and talking to students and finding new ways of seeing things. And I think that would be my contribution. Or I would *like* to think it’s my contribution.’ (*Mary, 39, lecturer, 60s university*)



For Mary, her activist work takes place within her academic work. She mentions the significance of teaching in practising one of the key moments of the sociological tradition. Based on Burawoy's ideas around public sociology, in 'Living Critique: Educating the Next Generation,' we re-emphasised the notion of students as the first public that we needed to address. In 'When the Public is Not Bigger Than an Office Space' Mary had elaborated on the potential dangers of being colonised by the media and the public. According to her, there would be a thin line between making a contribution and losing one's message. Whilst Celine takes a similar position, she thinks that it is our responsibility to tackle this challenge. In doing that, she refers to Edward Said as a main source of inspiration in how to approach the public.

'I am drawn to intellectuals who position themselves as public intellectuals. [...] So Edward Said's Reith lectures, *Representations of an Intellectual*, this book I always carry with me if I am speaking abroad. Because if I am getting a bit worried, nervy, I just read that. He talks about intellectuals, when you are given a position to speak it is your responsibility to intervene in the most effective way. So you have got to be a little bit of a strategist. [...] And it is not an accident that...Bourdieu's tools of analysis are very productive for me, but I am interested in the way in which he conducted himself as an academic, what he did within academia. How he took himself to other spaces. So I think there are different kinds of intellectuals. So I sort of really gear towards those kinds that have tried to make some kind of public engagement. But at the same time being very connected to the topic.'

(Celine, 40, senior lecturer, Univ. of London College)

Celine says that reading Said makes her mindful of her position as an academic. Even when we take into account the potential of being distorted by the media, we must not be discouraged from seeing the potential of making interventions from the position we have. Seven other respondents join Celine in arguing that we do have to maintain a dialogue with various publics, despite eventually facing some drawbacks

in doing that. Making an intervention, even if it is a small one, would still be an important step to take. According to Victoria, we must not miss our chance, so we have to cope with eventual distortion by the media and the difficulties in finding the time to communicate through the media.

‘I do use non-academic media. Not as often as I ought to, because one doesn’t get the time. But what I have done, the sort of work I do, interestingly enough, some of the work I have done, can be media-friendly. Because it is the stuff the public out there can engage with. So I have over the years been invited to disseminate, to talk about my work on the radio, TV occasionally, and on occasion through the odd piece in a national newspaper. So I have used these forms of dissemination and other forms of media, other than academic journals and academic books. [...] It is never entirely as I would have liked it. But I suppose I take the view, there is a sense in which, being given the opportunity to communicate more widely in terms of what you are doing, is probably sometimes worth it. And it has led to people who want to contact you to know further and to have further information. So I feel it is the balance between the opportunity of communicating more widely and an element of distortion.’ (*Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic*)

Hence, there are responsibilities we have to take up. For other respondents, such as Stephen, Burawoy’s focus on the media would slightly overshadow the fact that sociologists have always carried out public sociology, but sometimes without referring to them as such. As Stephen notes, it would sometimes be overlooked that people have been doing public sociology for many years within their departments without talking about it a lot.

‘The move towards public sociology is an interesting one, a good one. But you know, that famous piece, *For Public Sociology*, Burawoy, I liked the essay, actually. But the thing I find slightly exasperated by that: There are an awful lot of people who are working in Sociology Departments, who have been doing public sociology for a long time. And some of my own things I think are a kind of public sociology. The thing about it is that public sociology is something that is thought of

something you do in your spare time. That is part of Burawoy's point – that it should be part of what is considered the mainstream practice of the craft.' (Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College)

For Stephen, the downside of this enormous project is that other activities that have been carried out at the boundaries with the public for a long time do not receive as much attention, for the simple reason that they are not labelled as public sociology. Similarly, Hill Collins noted in an article about public sociology that apparently for many years she had been doing a kind of sociology that had no name (Hill Collins, 2007b). Other respondents mention that public sociology overemphasises TV and radio as the only ways of interacting with the public, whereas there would be many alternatives that are less praised, such as working with communities and the voluntary sector. For Elizabeth, working with various public actors and agencies has been a key component of her work for many years.

'All of my research has been. I have never had research funding through a research council. It has always been through other agencies. For example, the NHS, voluntary agencies. It has always been applied in that sense. I have never done a pure research project that I have just generated. It has always been in relationship to urban development initiatives and voluntary work. Because I have an interest in the voluntary sector. The research is always engaged with various kinds of publics. Normally more expert ones. But I have done research where you have to work with users. And [recently]...I was at a meeting of European mayors. A meeting to discuss mayoral politics in European cities. That is not a public as such, it was a lot of mayors in a closed room. So yes, that sort of public outreach as well as the research engagement has been fairly core to my work.' (Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university)

As Elizabeth mentioned, she has always received research funding through agencies other than research councils. With these agencies having an interest in applied work themselves, the public component in Elizabeth's work was never something that she

had to integrate in order to the label it as ‘public sociology’. Hence, it partly was due to the nature of her topics that made working with different public actors to a key element of her sociological activity throughout the whole research process.

Thus, as we could see in this section, public sociology can take rather varied shapes. For some respondents, public sociology would not necessarily be an act of engagement with the media. Rather, they saw academic work and scholarship as an act of activism in itself that could be politically important. Others argued that despite eventually facing some drawbacks in working with non-academic media, we would have to take the opportunities we get to maintain a dialogue with various publics. Finally, it would be important not to overstate the use of new media as a way of doing public sociology as these are not the only ways of interacting with the public. Yet, there would be many alternatives that are less praised, such as working with communities and the voluntary sector.

## 15 The Sound of a Lived Discipline

At this year's Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association I had a wonderful conversation with a colleague over dinner. We talked about the joy of revisiting the classics. This conversation was triggered by my comment that the length of an undergraduate degree would not be enough to discover the richness that the classics can offer to us. He agreed. We talked about the timelessness of certain texts and the need to revisit them. Georg Simmel came to our mind. After that we had a long chat about new formats for sociology – photography, videos, films, exhibitions. New sounds, as we called them. Someone overhearing our conversation may have perceived this discourse as an almost random collection of topics or could have noted an apparent sudden shift in the conversation. And yet, there was a unifying theme running through it. It was the reflection that living what we call the sociological imagination is possible in quite different formats. Having come to the end of this thesis, this chapter is dedicated to illustrating once again what has accompanied us all the way long: the idea of the sociological imagination and the different key features of sociology that we identified in my respondents' narratives. How the sociological imagination still keeps unfolding in its richness is documented in what we can see as British Sociology as my thirty respondents narrate it. Their stories are a tribute to sociological key moments, within and outside of sociology.

## **15.1 *Keep Up the Rhythm of Critique: Waltz, Samba and Videos for Sociology***

The reptile hears the music and starts to move. There was a sound to the words even if one has forgotten about it. First, a few one-two-threes in essayic form, then some lively samba. Finally, the reptile unpacks a video-camera from the top of its shell. Let's not forget the script, this is sociology. 'Sure', the reptile replies, 'no doubt about that' – and trots off.

In this chapter we would like to cherish the varying shapes and sounds in which the social and critique can be expressed. In reference to different genres, waltz, samba and videos will accompany us as metaphors, and also as invitations to express the social and critique in different ways. Let us first remind ourselves of what it was that sociologists set out to do in 'The calling of sociology – sociologists' claims and aspirations'. Barbara re-iterates the ideas of sociology and the calling of sociology she relates to.

'At the moment, my feeling is that the task of the sociologist is to facilitate open debate about how and why we live the way we do. That's what's important for me. And especially for people who are at the rough end of society. I think that without that, sociological inquiry becomes rather self-indulgent. For me, the reason I take the position I do is because I will never forget picking up literature at a time when it was a very intense, emotionally intense and economically difficult time for me, to read literature written by social researchers and analysts. And I am very mindful of that in my teaching that what is written in itself can be a huge public service. [...] One can pursue, in the way the enlightenment told us, these projects to explain, to describe, to analyse. We don't have to have focus groups, we can just write about certain things, and that is a service in itself. It can be, if it is critical research. And the passion of certain writers for me, I just really appreciated it as a young person reading that stuff. I was very moved by the fact that these people

bothered. Sociologists have that task.’ (*Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic*)

Barbara remembers her youth when she started to read sociological classics and how much these texts had touched her. There is a temporality to such pieces of academic work, a slow but constant flow of ideas. Barbara’s statement reminds us of the captivating beauty and clarity of sociological prose. It speaks clearly and in detail. It is this purity and ever-fascinating simplicity of a classic written format that took Barbara’s attention, analogous to a classic waltz that captures us. Yet, the calling for public sociology and for an interaction with journalism and the media could be too easily misread as a lack of appreciation of classic ways of conveying ideas that are equally important. Stephen argues that ideas needed different ways of being conveyed. Whilst there would be risks of employing too inward-looking academic language, at the same time some ideas needed complex language to live.

‘And then, what kind of writing is appropriate to the sort of argument you make? Zygmunt Bauman has a lovely formulation where he says, sociologists suffer from the danger of repeating the experience of the ancient scholars who wrote and spoke in Latin. And only spoke to themselves as a result. And academic prose suffers from that inward-lookingness. But my feeling about it is, I think there is a place for academically difficult writing and philosophically difficult language. A person that comes to mind is Theodor Adorno’s defense of complex, abstract language. He said that sometimes the people who are the advocates of clarity, betray the truth that they claim to speak. They make clarity into simplicity and crudity in thought. I have some sympathy for Adorno. At the same time, I think the turning inward of language, which is academic language at its worst, produces a forced exclusion. And sometimes that means writing in different forms to reach and to communicate with audiences outside this kind of medieval universe. [...] on the one hand I hold to Adorno. And on the other hand I hold to figures like Primo Levi or George Orwell. Brilliant writers, transparently clear prose. Their clarity in expression did not lead to simplicity in thought and critique. One of the great mistakes is to collapse clarity and simplicity. So I kind of want to have it both ways. Maybe it is a tactical

thing about communication. Some ideas need complex language to make the ideas live.’ (*Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College*)

Hence, Stephen stresses the importance of not confusing clarity and simplicity, as they can be found in both complex and simple language. In relation to the temporality and slowness that is needed for academic work, Annette thinks about the different timescales in which knowledge is produced. She remembers a big company approaching the department in order to work together. They were interested in fast output. Yet, according to Annette, the production of critical values happens over a longer timeframe.

‘One of the things that I think about being an academic. There is something about the temporality of academic work and life that I think is important. The length of time of it. The fact that people do stay in areas for a long period of time. And the thoughtfulness, and the modesty and the qualifications. And I know that people in other professions get very much frustrated with that. But they are things that are worth preserving. I think there is a kind of, the value of intellectual work, to have that slow, thoughtful work in the social world as a whole. I kind of see it as a contribution to that as well. That person has been working in this area for five or six years. After that it will take them another five or six years. And I think there is a real value in that...In some ways I think of it in my mind as a production of a set of values, critical faculty, not being afraid of ideas, not being afraid of not agreeing or not being afraid to agree as well, but to know why you do. So in some ways I think I have understood my own work less as the production of knowledge and more as the production of values that I feel comfortable with.’ (*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

I agree with Annette. The temporality of academic work and the time it takes to produce critical values are worth preserving. However, whilst we can still speak of a certain kind of temporality to be in place in academia in comparison to a think-tank or a consultancy firm, we notice with surprise that Annette did not mention the RAE as the actual main threat to what she labels as the production of values. Indeed, the



production of critical ideas has become increasingly difficult in a time where the machinery of assessment constrains their development, or simply makes them redundant. Roberts points out that academic freedom and the production of critical values become somewhat vacuous phrases if the frameworks in which we work do not allow for these values to be accomplished: 'Unless the definition of academic freedom includes certain rights to organise the production and distribution of knowledge in the setting of 'natural rights of the life of the mind', then that freedom is nominal and vacuous' (Roberts, 2002: 93).

Whilst we cannot deny the pressures of the research market, what is needed is a little more openness to other ways of expressing the social, in which we may reach audiences in a more meaningful way. According to Stephen, sometimes it seems that we have failed to write about the social in a way that conveys it to people. This in itself may well be a consequence of the pressures of publishing. According to Les Back, we needed to work constructively and sociologically within the constraints that we are facing, looking at the full scope of opportunities that we have in front of us: 'We live in dark times but sociology – as a listener's art – can provide resources to help us live through them, while pointing to the possibility of a different kind of future' (Back, 2007: 166). Back suggests making more use of modern media in conveying the social and practising sociology as a listener's art: 'Reassessing the appropriateness of our tools need not lead to epistemological defeat or a turning away from vital life. Rather, I want to suggest that it might invite an opportunity to bring sociology alive. [...] A reassessment of sociological craft invites an opportunity to reinvent the nature of observation and measurement. The scope of

this opportunity is increased through the availability to social researchers of multimedia technologies and new information technologies. By introducing interactivity and exploiting the possibilities of new media for iterative analysis we might think of sociological texts having a life beyond the final full stop of a research manuscript' (Back, 2007: 165). Different ways of making thoughts aloud are very common in other fields that, like sociology, try to critique developments in society. In this context we may wish to think of the samba drummers of the anti-globalisation movement "Attac," trying to bring their critical message across.<sup>92</sup> Whilst this is not to say that all sociologists should become dancers, filmmakers and actors; rather, looking beyond our discipline can help us cultivate a contemporary spark of imagination in expressing the social for what otherwise easily becomes a mass of sociological jargon.

Recently, the visual has experienced a rise within sociology (Rose, 2001), as can be seen in the vivid examples of Max Farrar's work on racialised boundaries (Farrar, 2005) or Les Back's studies in relation to immigration (Back, 2007). Knowles talks about the visual as another way of expressing the social: '[...] images are a point of access to the social world and an archive of it. Social analysis reaches beyond and beneath common understanding and makes connections. So do visual strategies. [...]' In capturing the particularity of social processes, illustrating the general in the particular, and illuminating the relationship between the two, visual methods are particularly well suited to developing what Mills referred to – in what was intended

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<sup>92</sup> See <http://www.rhythmsofresistance.co.uk/?lid=126> for creative and rhythmic examples of resistance and <http://www.attac.at/sambattac.html> for an Austrian samba batteria opposing globalisation [accessed 20 September 08].

in a non-disciplinary-specific sense – as the ‘sociological imagination’ (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004: 7).

According to Howard Becker, anthropologists and sociologists have been using photography ever since the establishment of both disciplines: ‘In sociology’s beginnings, photographs were an integral part of the disciplinary project of repairing a society that wasn’t working well. They provided what in those innocent days we took to be concrete, ‘objective’ evidence of bad things going on: substandard housing that afflicted the poor, the evil consequences of inbreeding among ‘mentally defective’ people, the vicious circumstances of child labour, the condition of immigrant populations. Sociologists lost interest in the reformist uses of photography as they shifted their attention from reform to scientific generalization. Photography’s standing declined because of its association with the ‘unscientific’ business of social reform and very few photographs accompanied sociological articles and books.’ (Becker, 2004: 193-194). Against the background of such debate, several of my respondents reported on their experience with visual methods, in particular photography and filmmaking. Hayley speaks about the enriching experience of filmmaking, both as a way of communicating research results and as a medium to convey research in its own right.<sup>93</sup>

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93 The author herself has had the chance of experiencing the richness of the film medium in doing research. Over the last two and a half years the author has been working on a collaborative film project with a few undergraduate students, an academic and an administrative member of staff at the Reinvention Centre, University of Warwick. ‘Students at Work – Learning to Labour in Higher Education’ is a documentary film on work as an organising principle of life and its omnipresence in student life, both as a way of sustaining their studies as well as preparing themselves for the world of work. The film thereby deals with the challenges marketised Higher Education brings about and suggests reflexive ways of being critical within it. The film will shortly be available online at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention>.

‘One of the things that I do think is really important is trying to make my work accessible. In some way, usually in some kind of diluted way, I have been involved in media stuff. In fact when I was an undergraduate, I was involved in making an open space TV program, which was a sort of open access. About the Public Order Act. This was something I felt very strongly about. I wrote the script for it. And then I was involved in making a documentary about X for the BBC a couple of years ago. And then we made a TV program which was called X and was based around the research [I did]. Which was a BBC 3 programme. It was a very popularised version of the research but actually it didn’t distort it. It managed to get a message across that was a sociological message about how personal life is changing, and it was based on our research. I can show that programme, although it is a bit embarrassing, and I can say yes, this is making sociology popular and that is an important thing to do. And I was involved in a programme that was broadcast only couple of weeks ago that was looking back on ten years of New Labour and social change. And again I was drawing on my work.’ (*Hayley, 42, professor, red-brick university*)

Whilst the beginning recognition of the visual and sound as ways of expressing the social need to be appreciated, finding spaces for ways of living the sociological imagination that go beyond the written word seems difficult in the current environment of the RAE. As sociologists hardly ever get the spaces to preserve work other than in written form, it is very difficult to find publishers and recognition for these other media. Whilst film can be distributed in more straightforward ways, maintaining something for posterity and thus finding recognition is a challenge in the case of exhibitions, installations and the like. One of the solutions to this problem of the gradual disappearance of products is the creation of webpages that could preserve work for the future and could thus lend it visibility.<sup>94</sup> Sociologists

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<sup>94</sup> In a project entitled “The Labour of Refurbishment,” Dawn Lyon and Peter Hatton documented the process and work of refurbishment of an historic building on the University of Kent’s Medway campus. As part of a research project on the labour of refurbishment of a former naval building on the University of Kent’s Medway campus, an exhibition from the project took place in December 2007, comprising photos, recovered objects and a slide-show of images of the building works. Several images have been placed on permanent display in the café and other spaces of the building in order to preserve the work (see <http://www.kent.ac.uk/sspsr/staff/academic/lyon/rochester.pdf>. [accessed 28 May 08]). Another example for creative sociological work and its preservation is Tim Strangleman’s exhibition on the Guinness brewery, which closed after seventy

who were involved in the production of installations and exhibitions have been thinking of these crucial issues of preserving their work for posterity.<sup>95</sup>

Yet, promoting new expressions for the sociological imagination is not to say that conventional formats of sociology are made less valid. One could not have put it better than one of my respondents, who stated that we still have theatre-goers, despite the advent of video clips. In a similar way, books as classic formats of academic writing will exist side by side with new formats of sociology that integrate photography or film.

‘[...] The discipline is, I think, intellectually well-defined and institutionally set up, which means it is like you have video clips but you still have theatre. There may be fewer theatre-goers but you can’t eradicate it. So the sociological world view I would think is part of modern societies.’ (*Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university*)

Furthermore, what Arthur alluded to with his comment is the idea that whilst sociologists cannot claim to have the monopoly to explain the social within a knowledge society where other actors are equally knowledgeable and have developed new forms of expressing their knowledge, he nevertheless considers sociology as an institutionalised form that will continue to exist.

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years of production in 2005. His study combined interviews with workers with a wide variety of photographic material generated as part of the project as well as from the company’s archives. In an attempt to preserve a range of the contemporary images of the site before closure, Strangleman constructed a webpage: <http://www.workinglives.org/guinness%20site/index.htm> [accessed 18 July 08].

95 The author has been experiencing similar problems with keeping a memory of an exhibition entitled ‘Sociologists Talking’, jointly organised with Cath Lambert in March and April 2008 in the University of Warwick. Parts of the sound files and photography that constituted parts of the conference will be available for future reference in due course at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention>.

## 16 Against and Beyond: For Sociology

We started with questions; we now have answers. How do sociologists see themselves and how are their relationships with the discipline? What do sociologists in the UK see as the key features of the discipline? How are sociologists' aspirations translated into their sociological practices? How can sociology as a discipline be lived in 21<sup>st</sup> century Higher Education landscapes?

In 'The calling of sociology – sociologists' claims and aspirations' we invited the reader to get to know sociology from scratch. With the help of the narratives of my thirty respondents, we were devoted to unpacking all layers of sociology. This comprised an analysis of my respondents' aspirations as sociologists and their processes of sociological becoming, as well as an exploration of sociologists' understanding of the key features of the discipline and its objectives. Why is engaging with sociology worth it, and what is our purpose? My respondents' narratives on their socialisation into sociology as a body of knowledge and as an institution, and their framing of sociology as a discipline and its objectives, were revealing. As these building stones were put together, an edifice rich in structure and colour emerged. We learned that perceptions of the discipline, their coming into being and sociologists' aspirations can only be fully understood if we see epistemological, biographical, generational and institutional facets in their togetherness. Respondents who felt marginalised within the discipline, both on a

material and an intellectual level, did not always clearly identify as sociologists. Furthermore, we found out that generational issues play a big part in how my respondents saw themselves as sociologists. Sociologists who were socialised into the discipline shortly after the war, and up until the 1960s, experienced the expansion of sociology in this country like no other generation, whereas the generation that entered the system in the late 1980s and 1990s has never seen anything other than a scarcity of jobs and a Higher Education system with a strong focus on assessment. This, in addition to my respondents' theoretical positioning and their biographical background, had an impact on how my respondents related to what they identified as sociology's key features: the social, critique and synthesis.

In contrast to the cheerful tones of the first part, the second part of our analysis 'Sociological Practice – Realities and Tensions' was accompanied by a rather bleak touch. My respondents' aspirations and what they laid out as the key features of sociology were put to a thorough test. The investigation of sociological practice addressed the underpinnings of the production of social theory and its omissions, the marginalisation of certain concepts within sociology, the framing of sociological practice by Higher Education regulations such as the RAE and its consequences – the glorification of research at the expense of teaching – the disciplining of sociologists who aim to practise sociology's synthetic character, sociologists' complicity in undermining critique in academia and, finally, sociology's constrained way of interacting with publics. It seemed that sociology has, after all, largely failed to live up to its own expectations.

As we revisited sociologists' disciplinary aspirations in 'Living Sociology', we observed a sense of disillusionment with the discipline that partly went as far as to question the achievability of grand claims altogether. This resonated in a very ambivalent relationship with sociology's initial claims. Sociologists' partial failure to live up to their own expectations was partly reported as an inevitable consequence of post-modernity and the end of the grand narratives. Whilst we acknowledged the necessity of being able to question one's views and to develop them further, in the case of my respondents this often turned out to be a journey of aspirations that ended up in their neglect or abandonment. Some of my respondents also explained their changing aspirations by reference to events in their lives. Others looked at what was left of their wish to contribute to social change and critique, particularly accusing the rigid system of assessment in Higher Education for resulting in what both they and I have identified as utmost complicity and careerism.

We drew a dark picture. The crucial point is how we revisit sociology's key elements in current times in the light of past failures. One of my respondents, George, a senior lecturer in a London University College, sees sociology as a post-enlightenment project that is able to learn from its mistakes. He concurs with Habermas, who sees it as our political responsibility to continue our project of critique, despite the shadows we are facing.

'The purpose is to find more rational ways of social living. That is the political responsibility of sociology. Any attempt to subvert that is to pervert sociology. It is something that I can say quite confidently is wrong. In effect sociology is a product of post enlightenment modernity and that is its political responsibility. I am with Habermas – that modernity is an unfinished project – I am not with the Frankfurt school,



in particular with Adorno and Horkheimer that there are the dark sides – that some sides are not possible in the enlightenment project because of the manifestation of the dark sides. I am an optimist.’ (*George, 64, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

If we follow George, what we should do as sociologists is to keep this project of post-enlightenment modernity alive. In ‘Living Sociology’, we reiterated the importance of the continuation of this project that we call sociology. As Les Back put it so powerfully, ‘Sociology is a way of living and something that is practised as a vocation, a way of holding to the world and paying critical attention to it. So, ‘live’ is being used here as a sociological verb. The price of insight may well be discomfort, be it in the puncturing of soothing illusions or the questioning of our most basic assumptions about progress or hope’ (Back, 2007: 165). In ‘Living Sociology’ we provided an outline of the shapes of these sounds, the visual pictures, the written forms that Back could have referred to. Our aim was to show that all these various ways of doing sociology can be seen as expressions of the sociological imagination in its struggle for critique and social progress in society.

In ‘Living Sociology’ we demonstrated that the universalist tendencies of a lot of classic social theory should nevertheless not prevent us from revisiting the classics and reading them from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the experience of the failures and fractures of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My respondents showed how difference needs to be integrated in all levels of sociology. Whilst emphasising the necessity of integrating difference as an analytical category and drawing on the enriching sources that post-modern writers gave us, Ben Agger points out that the incorporation of difference as an analytical category must not imply the loss of

critique (Agger, 2002). Like Agger, what we are aiming for is a fully-fledged sociology, rather than post-modern contingency that has lost an analysis of the social on the way. We would like to continue to live critique, the heart of sociology, against the stream of its being consistently emptied, emerging as a plain landscape of methodological reflexivity, and as a narcissistically-oriented posture of political correctness that says critique but means careerism and stagnation. Annette's vision of sociology strikes a similar chord as George's. Her wishes for the discipline are to preserve the value of the sociological imagination in spite of worrying developments in the discipline. Sociology would have the role of a risk-taker and needs to be relevant. Yet, most of all, for Annette the key mark of keeping up the sociological imagination and maintaining relevance is to provide a critique of society that encompasses our selves.

'I think probably relevance and imagination. Relevance, in the sense of enabling one's object of studies to speak back. And that usually means changing yourself. That means a risk factor. I don't mean relevance in the sense of this is a big media topic. [...] The sociological imagination, I do think there is value in all of that. When we were talking earlier about people being depressed about the way the discipline is going. Well, I don't find it productive. What I was saying about the possibility of constraints being generative. Probably seeing imagination in the sense of constraints as being generative. It is not that I think things aren't awful. But at the moment I am very optimistic, I am on the up.' (*Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College*)

Whilst we cannot deny the darkness out there, we have sufficiently addressed the argument that deplores how an ideal becomes compromised. The reader may now be bored with the stories of assembly lines producing research junk, as true as they are. The reader may be equally bored with the declamation of the end of the university and the end of critique, though there is admin and not critique. The boredom is about

to burst into the next level, right into a burning anger. Yet, this time it is not a feeling of being bored with ‘the other’, ‘the culture’, ‘the students’, ‘the RAE’, ‘the marketisation of the university’. This time, the boredom, the anger will be directed at ourselves. What started as boredom may be recognised as a burning but disguised frustration about our complicity with one of the most self-destructive systems, and thus the slow death of the faculty to think and move.

We visited different places in which sociologists themselves compromised the sociological calling and critique as our greatest good. We were told about the devaluation of teaching and the glorification of research. It seems that it is teaching that keeps my respondents’ aspirations as sociologists alive. Roberts suggests asking ourselves the following question: ‘In short, each reader who aspires to be an active proponent of the university ideal has to ask himself or herself the questions: how can I teach someone to think critically if I have uncritically submitted to a system in which I do not believe? Can a professor in an ancient university who is systematically stripped of her or his legitimate authority and subjected to the normalization and forcibly organised mediocrity of a line-managed ‘Quality’-controlled environment do other than respond to the inspiration of figures in the tradition worthy of respect and denounce corruption?’ (Roberts, 2002: 110).

The closure of several sociology and social science departments over the last few years, processes of redundancy and the egregious absence of collective protest by fellow sociologists against these developments is further testament to the sociological calling increasingly emptying itself of substance: ‘Most academics

seem to have passed uncomprehending and silent to their intellectual slaughter; fatally they have neglected to investigate, in accordance with the canonical criteria of their own vocation, that is with critical and above all, *critically reflexive* thought, the weapons of the enemy' (Roberts, 2002: 105).<sup>96</sup>

Taking a slightly different route, John Law and John Urry may frame developments of de-politicisation and dissolution within the university as examples of the mere enactment of the social by the social sciences in the university and as an effect of sociology changing analogous to the outside world (Law and Urry, 2004). According to Law and Urry, the changing constitution and outlook of sociology should not take us by surprise any longer. Rather, the increasing dissociation of sociologists from their principles could be understood as a reflection of what Urry and Law perceive to be seeing out there on an ontological level, namely, the declining significance of the concept of society.

We do not want to ignore this indication, but we aim to treat it radically differently to Law and Urry. Finally, we want to relate the sad insights of the lack of sociologists' resistance and of sociology being reduced to another form of practising the social without levelling critique back at the places where we are; to this country and to its recent political history and this potentially having left a mark on what sociology is today and what sociologists dare and do not dare to do. As Roberts put it, 'In seeking to articulate some of the dilemmas in Higher Education in Britain, [...] what has happened in the university is a microcosm of societal abuse

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<sup>96</sup> Roberts' observations of sociologists' conduct may resonate particularly well at a time when the 2008 RAE results are due to be published and eventual closures of departments and redundancies have to be anticipated.

characteristic of Britain as a whole since 1979' (Roberts, 2002: 88). It has also been mentioned by several of my respondents that our absence in protesting is a heritage of the Thatcher era. Victoria shares her thoughts with us.

'I know that around the eighties, sociology as a profession, my understanding as a subject area was attacked by the government. That it became one of those areas that were undermined by the Thatcher government. And I suppose that is reflected in what Thatcher said that there is no such thing as society, just individuals. But also, for me that became a metaphor for how the discipline was judged, how the subject was judged. But I am aware that at the time when the discipline and the profession were under attack, the setting was that the profession did not come out fighting. It could have done more really, in terms of campaigning, providing a counter-hegemonic message. So I got the impression that although there was a kind of stance made on part of the profession, it wasn't as strong as it could have been.

I am also informed that also during that period what a number of sociologists did was to migrate away from Sociology Departments and to locate themselves in other contexts, in other faculties, in other subject areas. I am also informed that there are also more sociologists, professionally defined out of sociology than there are within the profession as such. So you find them in medicine, you find them in occupational health you find them in other subject areas rather than in the traditional Sociology Departments. Which I think is indicative of the failure on the part of the discipline in the UK at the time when it was under threat, to actually take a stand and become political, not only with a small "p," maybe at that time with a large "P." I think that has been to the detriment of the discipline. If we are there to be that critical eye, to have that critical take on society, with the British I think there is a conservatism. And I don't think we have that sort of history here in this country, within the discipline. And to me that has been disappointing, because there is a lot of posturing within this country. I get the impression that a lot of sociology within this country, the discipline in this country has never had a radical edge to it. It has always been a separation between what is produced in terms of the intellectual body, which could be as radical as it comes. And I think there is a tacit understanding that that is not translated into practice, praxis. Perhaps one wouldn't expect a critical, reflective discourse, debate within history or chemistry, but one would have expected that within sociology, I would have thought! Could it be that it is probably my rather naïve working understanding of what sociology should be and could be, in that I would have thought by definition that it is one of those subject areas that has as its focal point some sort of critical engagement, some sort of way of engaging and looking at the world, that is skeptical, non-conforming. Of

course it can be, but the reality is that how it is practised in the UK, it isn't, perhaps.' (*Victoria*, 48, *professor, former polytechnic*)

Indeed, this is not part of sociology's current practice, and in places this is proudly presented as such. John Urry himself proclaimed in 'Sociology beyond societies' that Thatcher's saying that 'there is not such a thing as society' should not be deplored (Urry, 2000). Rather, it should have found more sympathisers. Twenty years after Thatcher, Urry argues that society would be an obsolete concept. Finding plenty of aficionados, he emphasises global flows and networks as key features of the modern world and criticises mainstream sociology for its exclusive focus on nation-states as a key unit of analysis (Urry, 2000). Such developments within sociology that declare sociology to be merely another form of social practice and not a critique, do give rise to worries. In this respect, Thatcherism and its effects cannot only be seen in sociological practice, but also in new trends in social theory. William Outhwaite clearly identifies this as the heritage of the Thatcher era that now finds its open revival in sociology (Outhwaite, 2006). Yet, there is plenty of evidence that counters the mobilities gaze and the denial of society within sociology, pointing to the dual existence of both processes of globalisation and networks and 'enclaved societies' as we encounter them in defence and immigration policies of high-security nation-states since 9/11 (Turner, 2007). Likewise, Outhwaite points out that society does still exist and that the nation-state still plays an important role within it (Outhwaite, 2006).

I would like to take Urry's point. It may be that what is out there for us to study and analyse may no longer be labelled as society. I further agree with Touraine that the

concept of society must not be reified: '[...] the most serious mistake would be to refuse to accept a general critical analysis of what is known as sociology, as if we could enhance our knowledge step by step with no reference whatsoever to a general mode of construction of social reality' (Touraine, 2003: 126). Alvin Gouldner comes back for a final handshake. His words are in our ears as we try not to celebrate sociology as an empty myth, but as a tradition of thought that is there to be filled with life and questioned in our immediate environments as a representation of society – the university, the workplace, our relationships with students and colleagues, our awareness of sociology's finally being paid work. I did not ask my respondents about their beliefs in the validity of society as a concept and I did not ask the ontological question of whether society still exists. This has yet to be done if there is a future for these kinds of inquiries. As I have studied sociology and sociologists, what I saw and hope I have demonstrated to readers was this: there is a neo-liberal research market and there is globalisation. Yet, beyond seeing a globalised knowledge-production market, what we also saw was the heritage of a political era in the UK and its having found its continuation in partly complicit, politically inactive sociologists. There are fractures of the sociological calling, there is disbelief, suppression and discrimination. Inquiring into these relationships between the political/non-political out there, the heritage from the past and how sociology is practised and theoretically envisioned shall be our paths for the future.

In exploring new territories for sociology, we do not want to join in the creation of free-flying objects. Rather, what is needed is to keep the sociological imagination alive, *against* and *beyond* sociology, for what is to be done out there, for a better

society. We argued for a recuperation of the critical potential of sociology, working against more limited and compromised forms of sociological theorising and practical engagement. 'Beyond' was an invitation to look beyond sociology. Yet, this does not imply to abandon and to dissolve sociology. Rather, looking *beyond* sociology may give us back what is so much needed *for* sociology, being able to see the sociological inside as well as outside, without being precious about boundaries. Bureaucrats may walk away. A short glimpse of enlightenment, expressed in a subtle movement, may remain. There is a spark out there in the sentiment of the shelly reptile. The turtle keeps walking, holding a microphone.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> 'Elvis has left the building. Thank you, and good night.'



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## **APPENDIX A: Approaching Informants**

Dear ,

My name is Elisabeth Simbuerger and I am a second year sociology PhD student at the University of Warwick.

My thesis is a study on the self-understanding of sociologists in England. This involves an investigation of questions such as how sociologists relate to the discipline, how they see themselves in their sociological activities, what place sociology takes for them in their wider lives and how they relate to the public. My supervisors are Prof. Steve Fuller and Prof. Tony Elger.

My fieldwork consists of qualitative interviews with sociologists in Sociology Departments in England. The interviews will be carried out face to face and will take about one to one and a half hours. Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed.

I am writing to you because I would like to ask you whether you would be available to be interviewed for my PhD.

I would be very grateful if you could spare some time to share your thoughts with me on your understanding of your work as a sociologist or as a person working within a Sociology Department.

In case you need more information about my research, I will be happy to provide you with further details.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Elisabeth Simbuerger



## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

### Opening:

- A. I am currently working on my PhD-thesis on sociologists. I am interested in the self-understanding of sociologists and how they see themselves. Thanks again for being my interview partner and contributing to my PhD.
- B. The interview will last for 1 hour or 1,5 hours maximum.
- C. [Ask for recording permission.] I can guarantee that any personal details will be anonymised in the transcripts and the analysis.

### *Are you a sociologist?*

- 1.) Do you see yourself specifically as a sociologist? (If not, why not? So how do you relate to sociology?)

### *How did you get to sociology?*

- 2.) Looking back, what made you become a sociologist? OR ALTERNATIVELY, IF RESPONDENT DOES NOT CONSIDER HIMSELF/HERSELF A SOCIOLOGIST:
- 3.) How did you come to work in a Sociology Department?
- 4.) Please tell me a bit about your educational background and employment history.

### *What is sociology?*

- 5.) How does sociology differ from other disciplines for you?
- 6.) Do you think we have a particular task as sociologists? And if so, what does this task look like?

### *Sociological self-understanding*

- 7.) What's the main reason for you to be a sociologist? (or to work in a Sociology Department?)
- 8.) What do you aim for as a sociologist if you see yourself in a bigger picture?

### *Vocation vs. job*

- 9.) What place does sociology take for you in your wider life? (life-encompassing activity)
- 10.) Do you see yourself as a sociologist outside the university?
  - a. In your social life?
  - b. In your civic life?
- 11.) What does it mean to be a sociologist outside the university?
- 12.) What does sociology as a life-encompassing activity mean in practice?
- 13.) Is sociology primarily a job or a vocation for you?
- 14.) When is it a job?
- 15.) When is it a vocation? When do you feel passionate about it?

### *Academic identity vs. sociological identity*

- 16.) What does being an academic mean to you?

- 17.) Are being an academic and being a sociologist the same thing? Does being a sociologist add up anything distinctive to being an academic?

***Professional associations***

- 18.) Are you a member of any professional associations?

***Sociological groundings – sociological home-base***

- 19.) Overall, which sociological traditions (or which intellectual traditions more generally) do you feel closest to in your self-understanding as a sociologist?
- 20.) Whom do you identify with in sociology?
- 21.) Which other traditions outside sociology do you feel close to?
- 22.) How do these (sociological) theories/traditions that you feel close to as a sociologist play into your sociological practice?
- 23.) What led you to work on your specific research, your topic? What keeps you in this field? (Relevance of topic? Why is it relevant? Funding institutions?)

***Sociological practice***

- 24.) What range of activities is involved in being a sociologist? (In the following, may you please tell me more about all the activities you consider as part of your sociological practice and what they mean to you?)
- a. Research
  - b. Teaching
  - c. Administration
  - d. Intellectual activity outside the university, politics

***Ethical and political implications of being a sociologist***

- 25.) Do you think that being a sociologist implies any particular kind of ethical or political responsibilities?
- 26.) Can we and should we link intellectual with political projects? What is your take on this?
- 27.) What are the potentials and limitations of linking an intellectual and a political project?
- 28.) How do you relate to politics as a sociologist?
- 29.) What do you think about sociologists getting involved into politics? (Michael Burawoy and the ASA).
- 30.) Value free research vs. taking positions – Is there such a thing as value-free research?

***The sociologist and the outside world***

- 31.) How do you engage with the outside world/the public as a sociologist?
- 32.) Have you ever been involved with the public as a sociologist?
- 33.) When does this usually happen? On which occasion?
- a. Consolidating a new research topic – meeting communities and investigating communal demands
  - b. Doing research/fieldwork
  - c. Dissemination of research results in written or oral form (type of audience)
  - d. Ethically, politically motivated engagement with the public

- e. Not directly research-related contact with public
- f. Being consulted as an expert beyond one's field of specialism
- 34.) What's the nature of you being approached by the public?
  - a. Being consulted as an expert, as a specialist
  - b. Being asked to give one's opinion on a topic that is not academic
- 35.) What is your motivation to enter the public arena as a sociologist?  
(dissemination of results, discussion, engagement with communities, ethically/politically driven activity, vocational spirit)
- 36.) Why should it be important to enter the public arena?
- 37.) Do you also engage with the public as a sociologist outside your immediate field of specialism?
- 38.) What's the point of going public?
- 39.) What is your view of research-dissemination? How does the current emphasis on research-dissemination by funding institutions and the RAE on the other hand impact on your relationship and activities towards the public(s)?
- 40.) Which audiences (academic/non-academic) are you engaging with and in what ways?
- 41.) Which means do you use for communicating your research/your ideas?
  - a. Speech
  - b. Written, strictly academic format (academic journals)
  - c. Non-academic journals, newspapers
  - d. TV
  - e. Radio
  - f. Internet (webblogs, postings)

***The university, the department***

- 42.) How do institutional conditions impinge upon your work?
- 43.) What does facilitate you doing a specific kind of research and what does constrain you?
- 44.) How easy/difficult is it for you to do the kind of research you would like to do? (Funding, policies of publication, policies of universities)

***Outlook***

- 45.) Finally, would you like to state again how you see yourself as a sociologist?  
What are you aiming for?
- 46.) Would you recommend young people to study sociology?
- 47.) What are your biggest dreams as a sociologist?
- 48.) What do you wish for sociology (as a discipline, as a field)?

## Appendix C: Matrix of Interviewees

Inst.	Intv.	Type of University					Gender		Position					Age
		Old	Red-brick	60s <sup>98</sup>	Former Poly technic	New Unis	f	m	Post-doc	Lect.	Senior Lect.	Reader /Senior Research Fellow/ Principal Lecturer	Prof.	
I	1	X					X		X					30
	2	X						X			X			61
	3	X					X			X				39
	4	X						X		X				60
II	5	X					X		X					28
	6	X					X		X					29
	7	X						X					X	62
III	8		X				X				X			58
	9		X					X			X			64
	10		X				X						X	37
	11		X				X					X		37
IV	12		X					X		X				36
	13		X					X				X		51
V	14			X				X						43
	15			X			X				X			39
	16			X				X		X				33
	17			X			X			X				31
VI	18			X				X			X			49
	19			X			X				X			32
	20			X				X					X	44
	21			X			X				X			38
VII	22			X				X			X			64
	23			X			X				X			40
	24				X		X				X			46
	25				X			X			X			43
VIII	26				X						X			53
	27				X		X						X	48
	28				X			X			X			43
IX	29					X		X				X		52
	30					X	X				X			45

<sup>98</sup> As the reader may have noted, in contrast to the main text, respondents from a University of London College are not referred to in a separate category within this table. Rather, as some of the colleges within the University of London only became part of the University of London from the 1960s onwards, for the purpose of this overview, it seemed reasonable to categorise respondents from this college together with respondents from universities which were founded in the 1960s.

## Appendix D: Interview Analysis Overview

Interview/ Institution	Profile	Interview Summaries	Main Themes (in no particular order)
1/I	Anna, 30, postdoc fellow, old university	Early in her career; chose sociology because of her interest in issues of social inequality; having a transformative impact with one's work; realistic about what is achievable; using research skills for community groups; complexities in working with community groups/social movements; different interests as opposed to communities; we are privileged to do research; responsibility to do good research; Marxism, feminism as intellectual influences; thinking critically; reflexivity; teaching; commitment to talk to people outside academia; brochures, community reports; different styles of writing; rewarding – bigger audience than for academic article; access restricted for academic journals; hierarchies in academia; students should be more integrated in the discipline; sociology should be more outward looking, interdisciplinarity important; dreams of a permanent job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Young sociologist</li> <li>- Having an impact on society</li> <li>- Using research skills for community groups</li> <li>- Working with community groups is complex</li> <li>- Privileged position as a researcher</li> <li>- Responsibility to work well</li> <li>- Publics</li> <li>- Bigger audiences for publishing in non-academic formats</li> <li>- Departmental culture</li> <li>- Hierarchies in academia</li> <li>- Interdisciplinarity needed</li> <li>- Permanent job wanted</li> </ul>

2/I	Robert, 61, reader, old university	<p>Sociological training, works in a Sociology Department but does not have a sociological identity; sociology should be extinct – in a world run by him, intellectual core of department has vanished – people from all disciplines; research in evolutionary genetics important; questioning things was always his strength; old generation – experienced decades of change in HE; loves teaching – students like him; testing ideas with students; bad relationships with colleagues; outsider in department; colleagues not bothered about (undergrad) teaching; he was influenced by psychoanalysis for long time, not any more; now genetics; doesn't have an academic identity; doesn't talk about politics; people should spend more time with machines and less with people, people think too much; sociology gives too many interpretations; he doesn't go to conferences.; was on TV and radio a couple of times through personal contacts; now bad experience; would not recommend young people to study sociology; we need more statistical education, evolutionary theory and game theory</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No sociological identity</li> <li>- Sociology should be extinct</li> <li>- Evolutionary genetics</li> <li>- Psychoanalysis</li> <li>- Outsider in Sociology Department</li> <li>- Questioning the taken for granted</li> <li>- Old generation</li> <li>- Experienced change in HE</li> <li>- Loves teaching</li> <li>- Students as audience to test ideas</li> <li>- Sociology not a science</li> <li>- Sociology offers too many interpretations</li> <li>- Media contact ambivalent</li> <li>- More statistics needed in sociology degrees</li> </ul>
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3/ I	Elizabeth, 39, lecturer, old university	Sees herself as a sociologist, sociology helps you to understand power and organisations – but often disappointed, sociologists very complicit, no trade union involvement; Marxism and cultural sociology as home bases; her work is interdisciplinary, very conscious of not imposing political values on students; hardly any research at the moment – too busy during term time; it is because of teaching that she is an academic; with teaching, work has impact beyond computer screen; too much focus on writing and RAE; teaching rewarding; university changed her life; studying is empowering for students and rewarding for teachers; especially for more deprived student populations, helping students to develop skills of analysis. Very often politics leads and academics follow; her research always engages with various publics; most publications via agencies (funding) and not in journals, tension between consultancy and research; a lot of radio work; newspaper articles; inflation of research; no readership; no impact; teaching gets neglected; commitment to sociology and its history but sociology is more like a job, she might leave academia, can't take a lot of sociological research seriously	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociologist</li> <li>- University changed her life</li> <li>- Deplores failure of sociologists to apply sociological knowledge in their own organisations (corrupt system, lack of trade union involvement)</li> <li>- Union activist</li> <li>- Strong teaching identity</li> <li>- Having an impact on people</li> <li>- Agencies and communities</li> <li>- Tension between consultancy and research</li> <li>- Media work</li> <li>- Inflation of research – no impact on public</li> <li>- Commitment to sociology</li> <li>- Leaving academia?</li> </ul>
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4/I	Martin, 60, 60s and old university	<p>Sees himself as sociologist, drifting more towards social policy; social research and quantitative work more recognised there than in Sociology Departments; committed to sociology that is investigative and improving social world; skeptical about postmodernism and cultural turn; most sociological research is anecdotal; aversion of numbers in British sociology problematic – only theory respected; making students more knowledgeable in terms of quantitative methods; teaching; situation in the US different; Thatcher reinforced sociological identity in him; need to do good research to see what was going on - research as political contribution, opposition – his research impacted on politics; worked in many different places; departmental cultures; professional associations – promoting properly informed debates; no longer BSA member – does not reflect social policy research or quantitative research at all; a lot of good sociological research happens outside Sociology Departments (social policy, education, business schools); relationship with public(s) – most of his research published in governmental reports; no TV, radio; sociological outlook changed over years – now less rational theory oriented – recognising other influences (psychology)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social policy</li> <li>- Social research</li> <li>- Quantitative methods</li> <li>- Social change</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Good sociological research in other departments than sociology</li> <li>- British sociology</li> <li>- Impact of Thatcher</li> <li>- Changing politics with social research</li> <li>- Departmental culture</li> <li>- Changing theoretical outlook over years</li> </ul>
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5/II	Catherine, 28, research fellow, old university	Left school at 16, working class background, factory, later academia, enjoyed sociology, sociology appeals to working class people, more questioning than other disciplines; number cruncher, research for policy makers as a motivation to do sociology; teaching important; sociologists not engaged with real world issues; criticises sociologists for not knowing research subjects – contradiction between theory and practice; talks a lot about sociology, Bourdieu as influence, she isn't very theoretical, making research applicable to the real world as an aim, she is not really oriented towards the public, but sociology should be public; sociology should be more theoretical and interdisciplinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working class</li> <li>- Strong sociological identity</li> <li>- Young researcher</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Quantitative methods</li> <li>- Sociologists not engaged in real world issues</li> <li>- Not really theoretical background</li> <li>- Research as evidence for politics</li> <li>- No contact with the public</li> </ul>
6/II	Rose, 29, research fellow, old university	Sociologist. 'My nr. 1 identity in any aspect of my life.' Any good sociologist is going to be reading literature from all over the social sciences, at least; She reads biological sciences, psychology, economics; sociology gathers together all these different subjects; sociology needs to have an identity in order to have impact; she is against classifying people into qual and quant, she mainly uses quantitative methods, evidence is important for her; we need theory to explain research, not close to any particular theory, likes rational choice but also critical towards it, we should not talk about politics unless we know something; journalists have a lack of knowledge concerning sociology; she would like to have a permanent job in the future, temporary contracts are stressful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociology Nr. 1 identity</li> <li>- Reading widely necessary</li> <li>- Interdisciplinarity</li> <li>- Methods as a toolkit</li> <li>- Evidence for politics</li> <li>- Rational choice</li> <li>- Young researcher</li> <li>- Permanent job wanted</li> </ul>

7/II	Charles, 62, professor, old university	<p>Studied history, then sociology, sociology captures what he is interested in; still sees close links between history and sociology; started feeling as a sociologist from the early 80s onwards during Thatcherism; sociology under threat; comes from a poor background; personal experience and the time in which he grew up had an impact on his research topic – unemployment; we should provide data; social policy; works quantitatively and qualitatively; comparative research; Neo-Marxist background and institutionalism; sociologists as a collective should not act politically; he mainly does postgraduate teaching; mainly doctoral students; his work had impact on the EU, less so on the UK; a lot of EU projects; a lot of presentations for politicians; experience with journalists - they strongly abbreviated what he had said; dissemination of research; we need intermediaries who have social science degrees like Laurie Taylor or Polly Toynbee; not everybody is able to write in a journalistic style – not part of our skills; intermediaries should report on the social sciences on an ongoing basis so as to get an idea of the research process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Links between sociology and history</li> <li>- Thatcherism – shaped identity as a sociologist</li> <li>- Cohort of intellectual socialisation</li> <li>- Provision of data, evidence</li> <li>- Quantitative and qualitative methods</li> <li>- Social policy</li> <li>- Impact on politics (EU)</li> <li>- Mainly research</li> <li>- Postgraduate teaching</li> <li>- Distortion by media</li> <li>- Journalistic style not part of our skills</li> <li>- Intermediaries needed between social sciences and public</li> </ul>
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8/III	Martha, 58, senior lecturer, red-brick university	Sees herself more as a criminologist than a sociologist; sociology only part of her identity but by far not everything; working class, left school at 14, mature student; politically active already before university; we would have a task to oppose oppression but not necessarily because we are sociologists; sociology questioning things more than other disciplines – anthropology, history maybe similar; influenced by Feminism, Marxism, Foucault – but not a follower of anything; we can have an impact on society if we are not speaking Latin; we have to be careful about professional associations taking a political stance; teaching – she doesn't do research; puts a lot of effort into teaching; has taught in prisons and unemployment centers, having an impact on people's lives through teaching; changing environments in HE – massification – more difficult for teaching; some people teach – others only do research; doesn't want to have anything to do with the media – things get twisted all the time; but going public is important; most research has no effect; our language is not accessible; after all it is a job; students pay too much fees; boundaries between sociology and social policy should break down; teaching should be more important – changing the student experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Criminologist as an identity</li> <li>- Working class</li> <li>- Mature student</li> <li>- Political activist</li> <li>- Politics as a task for human beings</li> <li>- Politics not particular to sociologists</li> <li>- Being humane</li> <li>- Feminism</li> <li>- Questioning everything</li> <li>- Research inaccessible due to academic language</li> <li>- No media contact</li> <li>- Teaching identity</li> <li>- Different teaching contexts</li> <li>- Having an impact on people's lives through teaching important</li> <li>- Students' experience is changing</li> </ul>
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9/III	Carl, 64, senior lecturer, red-brick university	<p>Has never been anything else than a sociologist; Studied during students' movement; had a large impact on him; also interested in literature and history; sociology of knowledge; sociology as a vocation; most people fall back into ideologies; sociology gives you detachment from grand belief systems; Elias and Bauman as influences; much of sociology either disguised politics or metaphysics – acting on behalf of a group of people; the true sociologist is embattled – fighting the intrusion of ideologies from outside; his project is political but in the long term – not applied politics; he can only do his sociology within the university – free inquiry ethos within the liberal university; teaching and research go together, changes in HE impinge very little on his work – he publishes anyway, doesn't need funding; publishes in academic journals, writes for peers; no other connection to the public; people who make a career choose a topic of the moment – his work is a long term project; wishes to produce something of lasting significance; sociology should leave short term oriented outlook</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Influenced by the students' movement</li> <li>- Humanistic outlook</li> <li>- Sociology as a study against ideologies</li> <li>- Sociology as a vocation</li> <li>- Sociology as a long term project</li> <li>- The university as the last space for such pursuits</li> <li>- No problem with changes in HE and RAE (publishes a lot and doesn't need funding)</li> <li>- Writes for academic audience</li> <li>- No connection with the public</li> <li>- Wishes to produce something grand</li> </ul>
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10/III	Hayley, professor, 42, red- brick university	Working at the intersection with other disciplines, psychoanalysis; social change important; feels like a sociologist but was always an outsider, yet defending sociology outside sociology. Intellectual permeability, questioning academia but sees contradictions in own positions, sees herself as an activist, political change, privileged to be a researcher, autonomy, learning to speak the language of funders, making a career on her activism experience, making her work accessible for the public, public sociology, duty to go public, media, giving sthg. back, ethical and political responsibilities as a sociologist but also ethical and political responsibilities as a person, political stance as a human being, woman, feminist but not as sociologist; hasn't taught for ten years (grants), students should study more than sociology, too narrow, otherwise sociology is boring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intellectual permeability</li> <li>- Interdisciplinarity</li> <li>- Psychoanalysis</li> <li>- Feminism</li> <li>- Social and political change</li> <li>- Activism</li> <li>- Public sociology</li> <li>- Ethical and political responsibilities</li> </ul>
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11/III	Pauline, 37, senior research fellow, red-brick university	<p>Not a sociologist, mathematician or social statistician; no particular research interests, she likes juggling with data; provides data; doesn't know anything about sociology; she does not understand the terminology; She does not understand sociologists; her father was a civil servant; She only came in touch with politics when she came to uni.</p> <p>What she wants to convey to students is for them to be more comfortable with numbers.</p> <p>She likes projects that are more applied; one project had reports in the SUN; enormous effect and rewarding; but not good career wise, no academic articles; departmental culture; she feels like an alien in this department; doesn't like that so many people are so afraid of numbers - especially sociologists. When she looks at data she does not have any kind of hypothesis; sociologists always have assumptions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social statistician</li> <li>- Sociology is another world</li> <li>- Provision of data</li> <li>- Conveying numbers to students</li> <li>- Departmental culture</li> <li>- Alien in department</li> <li>- No interest in politics</li> <li>- Not a feminist</li> <li>-</li> </ul>
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12/IV	Fred, 36, lecturer, red-brick university	Sees himself as a sociologist 24/7; sociology very diverse, gives you the space to develop in many ways. Bringing ideas across to students as the first task he has as a sociologist; secondly research, thirdly, being a public sociologist, not his role yet but he is aiming for it, engaging with relevant debates; being a sociologist is not a nine to five job; incredible privilege to do this work; theoretical underpinnings – Marx as a starting point, recently feminist theory; theoretical basis informs his sociological practice, in teaching; union activist; biographical and political experience inform his research; having an impact with teaching because little is read in sociology; would like to see himself as a critical and engaged sociologist; sociology can be political; but there are also contradictions, we need to be self-reflexive; being an intellectual and questioning everything is in itself political; radio interviews, writing letters to newspapers; tries to publish abridged versions of his research in more popular media; ethical issue – returning sthg. to the researched; maybe not in academia for ever?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sociological identity</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Union activist</li> <li>- Biographical and political experience inform his research (migration)</li> <li>- Politics</li> <li>- Public sociology</li> <li>- Publishing widely is an ethical responsibility</li> <li>- Leaving academia?</li> </ul>
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13/IV	Arthur, 51, senior lecturer, red-brick university	<p>Always loooked beyond the boundaries of the discipline; reinforced by interdisciplinary institutions; works problem oriented; discipline means disciplining people; studied in the 70s – spirit of the time, sociology had advisory function for politics, not anymore; unlike in other disciplines (biology etc.) we still teach the grand fathers; sociologists became disillusioned and less politicised – like other people; diffusion of sociological concepts in society; now media and others work with higher speed; sociologists no longer only experts; more difficult to argue why sociology is different, theories; making a contribution to knowledge as driving force; nobody reads it; sociological outlook but one is always more than one thing; scholar – not so interested in getting views across to mass media; only speaks when longstanding expertise; no clear cut responsibilities as a sociologist – to provide good work; naivity of 60s has gone; difficult to say what it means to be progressive; things are more complex; good idea to voice opposition but not within professional assoc.; connection between teaching and research; eclectic – theories are not religions; no public involvement; private act of writing; challenges with biotechnologies; sociology should be more interdisciplinary; sociology will continue, part of modern societies; anticipating research topics important</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociological outlook</li> <li>- Interdisciplinarity - reinforced by institutions</li> <li>- Students' movement</li> <li>- Changes within sociology</li> <li>- Depoliticisation of sociology as part of a greater shift in society</li> <li>- Diffusion of sociological concepts in society</li> <li>- Sociology competing with other experts</li> <li>- Making a contribution to knowledge vs. no readership</li> <li>- Scholarly identity</li> <li>- No interest in mass media</li> <li>- Skeptical of public intellectuals</li> <li>- Ideologies do not reflect complexities of society</li> <li>- Sociology needs to be more interdisciplinary</li> </ul>
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14/V	Victor, 42, senior lecturer, 60s university	<p>Studied maths first, then sociology; ambivalent relationship to sociology; diverse discipline; identifies with sociological research that is closer to what he is doing; equally outsider status with statisticians; feels closer to US-tradition, his sociology is not so well reflected in British sociology; theory should be connected with empirical research; interested in macro level; no great intellectual or political profundity in what he is doing; quantitative issues underdeveloped in the UK; in an ideal world no drawers of qual., quant. and theory – it is a matter of adequacy; RAE pressure; hardly ever cited; people don't know how to read his work; ambivalent TV experience; retreated from conferences – time issues; doesn't like self-promotion; if you see it as a vocation all kinds of frustration might come in – (institutional constraints, status of research in the UK etc.); if you see it as a job – still quite good because flexible, less disappointment; ethical responsibilities – paying tribute to researched; his politics is to stay relatively apolitical; would wish to work with more like minded people; teaching more students and PhDs – then more impact; critical mass; problems in selection procedures of sociology students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maths, quantitative methods</li> <li>- Ambivalent relationship to sociology</li> <li>- Insider/outsider in the department</li> <li>- RAE</li> <li>- No readership</li> <li>- Retreated from academic dissemination business (conferemces)</li> <li>- Job vs. vocation</li> <li>- More affinity to US sociology</li> <li>- Wish for more quantitative sociology in the UK</li> </ul>
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15/V	Mary, 39, lecturer, 60s university	<p>Sociology as a job opportunity, doesn't identify strongly with sociology, no jobs in gender studies, sociology closest to what she is doing, gender has found a home primarily in Sociology; but probably the questions we deal with are somehow similar, doesn't like the idea of disciplinary identity, says she works in a Sociology Department; that probably makes her a sociologist; RAE, producing for sociology journals; she identifies herself as a feminist; intellectual and political commitment; she asks fundamentally sociological questions but they are informed by feminist commitment; intellectual work as activism; poststructuralism, Foucault; creating networks amongst feminists; work leads into leisure but difficult to control; work is also pleasure, loves reading and books; was involved in a public consultation, usually she doesn't write policy documents; some work on the radio; most of her work primarily written for academic audience; her topic gets eaten up by the media, abuse; but she wants to try and write more for non-academic users; critique of RAE; lucky to be in a research univ., well-off; she thinks that there is commitment to social justice in Sociology Departments - because people work on that; dreams of writing a really good book</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociology as a job opportunity</li> <li>- Against the idea of disciplinary identity</li> <li>- Labelled as sociologist by RAE</li> <li>- Feminist identity – intellectual and political commitment</li> <li>- Intellectual work as activism</li> <li>- Fear of mass media</li> </ul>
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16/V	Paul, 33, post-doc fellow, 60s university	<p>Sees himself as a sociologist, discovering sociology was like an epiphany, sociology very humanistic in orientation, he is interested in the links between sociology, social policy, philosophy, politics; considers his work as very interdisciplinary; we have to reach out beyond academia, but this applies to all academics and intellectuals; writing for different audiences; outside academia more dialogue oriented, feedback option good about new media, blogs; also sees a selfish dimension in being politically engaged and pushing a career and wanting to play a public role; people contribute in different ways, not everybody wants to be a public sociologist; ethical and political responsibilities but as human beings, sociologists are not better people; sociology clearly is a political subject but has strong reservations against sociology being used for distinct political projects; theoretical sources of inspiration changed over the years, initially influenced by Marxism, now more by postmodern theories, more skeptical of the idea of certainty (matter of age), now more open to ideas outside sociology; sociology should not colonise how we should understand the human and social world; also interested in psychoanalysis; sociology should be more open to range of perspectives and fields; interdisciplinarity also enhanced by funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interdisciplinarity, openness for bodies of knowledge beyond sociology</li> <li>- Reaching out beyond academia</li> <li>- Political and ethical responsibilities</li> <li>- Thatcher and sociology</li> <li>- Changing theoretical orientations within his career</li> <li>- Funding bodies shape the discipline</li> </ul>
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7/VI	Janet, 31, research fellow, 60s university	<p>Primary home is gender studies, sees her self as feminist social scientist, she is very interdisciplinary; social change; fantastic privilege to be a researcher, therefore need to give sthg. Back; ethical and political responsibilities; transformative effect of feminism within sociology, assessment culture in HE, gendered nature of academia, background as an activist, feminist post-structuralist framework, organises departmental seminar (transformation!), intersections of her own identities, political interests and intellectual passions, great department, feeding work back to the public, not to speak to a vacuum, (communities, media etc.), avoiding media distortion by writing articles herself, sociology should get more diverse both in theory and in practice (too white and male), difference as intellectual key concept</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interdisciplinarity</li> <li>- Feminism</li> <li>- Queer theory</li> <li>- Social change</li> <li>- Ethical and political responsibilities</li> <li>- Activism</li> <li>- Transformation</li> <li>- Difference as analytical key concept</li> <li>- Department</li> <li>- Publishing widely</li> <li>- Sociology (theory and reality) as a reflection of inequalities in society</li> </ul>
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18/VI	Christopher, 49, lecturer, 60s university	Sees himself as a sociologist or a criminologist, depending on the occasion, never targeted at a specific discipline, has broader goals, mature student, sociology as a liberating experience, social change, political commitment, motivation to be academic; sharing thoughts with young people, ambitions changed – age?, pressures of HE, different student profile, teaching very important, especially first year students; research with agencies and community groups, having an impact, engaging with the real world, public, widening audiences, writes for newspapers etc., TV, radio, weaving in sociological understanding, having an impact, corruptness of academia (RAE), disappointed with sociology as a profession, reflects inequalities of the outside world, we should know better, Marxist background but experience of academia and corruption made him get more distant, not aligning to big traditions anymore, ethical and political responsibilities, need to be taken seriously in academic practice!; institutional conditions, RAE, still autonomy in academia, revolution in sociology is needed, a discipline of public intellectuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interdisciplinarity</li> <li>- Mature student</li> <li>- Changing ambitions within the years</li> <li>- Social change</li> <li>- Political commitment</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Research with community groups and agencies</li> <li>- Public – widening audiences</li> <li>- Corruptness of academia</li> <li>- Gap between theory and sociological practice</li> <li>- Sociology – reflection of inequalities of outside world</li> </ul>
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19/VI	Lydia, 32, lecturer, 60s university	<p>Sociological perspective on the world is the best perspective to have; studied PPE; sociology – not to take anything for granted, to keep questioning things; privileged sort of work to do; we are not really making the world a better place, advancing our careers; no readership for our research; teaching as the only place where we can have a real impact on people's lives; questioning her abilities – young academic; sociology is work as everything else; other aspects in life important as well; doesn't like the language of vocation; this suggests we would be special; sociologists unreflexive about themselves – academia and departments full of hierarchies; gender; division of labour; feminist theory still not completely mainstream; ethical and political responsibility to teach well and to do good research; practice of research ethics hypocritical and counterproductive – less energy left for fulfilling political aims; dishonesty about the relationship between intellectual and political projects; we don't get confronted with views different from our own; we don't challenge each other's work – intellectual conformism; envies people with a theoretical background; thinks of herself as too empiricist; public involvement – radio interviews; distortion of research by journalists; feels going public is to show-off; when jargon is left aside sociologists are stating the obvious; research needs to go public; but she doesn't want to do it; aware of her contradictions; might leave academia at some point; departmental culture – isolation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Privileged work, autonomy</li> <li>- Sociologists unreflexive about themselves</li> <li>- Not making the world a better place; advancement of academic careers</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Gap between theory and practice</li> <li>- Hypocrisy of research ethics</li> <li>- Gender</li> <li>- Young academic</li> <li>- Sociology is work</li> <li>- Relationship between intellectual and political projects complex</li> <li>- Intellectual conformism – we don't challenge each other</li> <li>- No particular theoretical background</li> <li>- Departmental culture</li> <li>- Going public – ambivalent</li> <li>- Leaving academia?</li> </ul>
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20 VII	Stephen, 44, professor, University of London College	<p>Skeptical about the desire to canonise and to draw disciplinary boundaries; anthropologist by training, but drawn to sociological ideas; sociology of value because of its intellectual permeability; thought a lot about sociology and our role; being a witness to our times, to live with doubt in a productive way, enlightenment; Strangers to ourselves, we don't analyse ourselves; impact of Thatcher on sociology, working class background, advantages and disadvantages of writing in complex ways; aesthetics; little reflection on what public sociology means in practice; public sociology complex business; skeptical about hyper-political posturing, links are never straight forward –complexity, compromise, tactics; thinking and writing for different audiences; privileged to be professor; online publications don't count for RAE; radio, TV, newspapers, films – good experience; sociology not only a discipline of words, visual; university as mind opening experience, to think otherwise; teaching, space of dialogue; vocation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Close to sociology but disciplinary labels don't matter</li> <li>- Being a witness to our times</li> <li>- Enlightenment</li> <li>- Intellectual permeability</li> <li>- Sociologists not critical of themselves</li> <li>- Gap between sociological theory and sociological practice</li> <li>- Thatcher</li> <li>- Working class background</li> <li>- University as mind opening experience</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Public sociology</li> <li>- Politics</li> <li>- Engagement with the real world</li> <li>- Different audiences</li> <li>- RAE</li> </ul>
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21 VII	Annette, 38, senior lecturer, University of London College	Has always identified as a sociologist; always on the boundaries of the discipline; her work didn't seem to fit; troubled where to publish and where to get funding; relief – currently writing a book where she explains how work that is sometimes seen at the boundaries of the discipline relates to core sociological issues; temporality of academic work important; value of intellectual work; corporability of research; real obligation to students; university as political space; doesn't want to have a mission; not being afraid of not agreeing and agreeing; now more open to think outside boxes – age; production of values is political; feminism, poststructural theory, science studies; influenced by department; visual arts, artists; mainly publishes for academic audiences; prefers to be involved with publics during the research process; collaborative projects rather than research dissemination; writing for catalogues and exhibitions; likes the craft of writing; never says yes to radio or TV requests – too shy; admires people who do it; aware of her own contradictions; doesn't like people being depressed about the way the discipline is going - possibility of constraints being generative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociological identity</li> <li>- On the boundaries of the discipline</li> <li>- Core sociological issues</li> <li>- Engaging productively with constraints</li> <li>- Temporality of academic work vs. fast running markets</li> <li>- Critical faculty of sociology</li> <li>- Production of values</li> <li>- Thinking beyond sociology</li> <li>- Departmental culture</li> <li>- Collaborative research (art)</li> <li>- Craft of writing</li> <li>- Fear of media</li> </ul>
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22 VII	George, 64, senior lecturer, University of London College	<p>Strong sociological identity; postwar-generation – feels like a dinosaur in his department; phenomenological sociology; sociology is a synthetic discipline, no policing of disciplinary boundaries in his department, one can develop sociological perspective on everything; works on literature and music; sociology informs his life; sociology as a product of post-enlightenment modernity, our purpose is to find more rational ways of social living; would not be good to be governed by intellectuals; relationship to public – 1.) teaching (having an impact on a generation), 2.) research 3.) radio broadcasting; HE conditions – best staff is doing research and not teaching, unfinished research is churned out; he does not write for newspapers – no editorial control; Thatcher – one generation of sociologists is lost; life has massively changed in HE, he is very aware of very different starting positions for younger scholars; difficult to get funding; sociology should engage much more with contemporary political processes (like US sociology); move away from quantitative sociology needed; sociological work underremunerated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociological identity</li> <li>- Postwar-generation</li> <li>- Phenomenological sociology</li> <li>- Sociology is a synthetic discipline</li> <li>- Departmental culture</li> <li>- Sociology informs his life</li> <li>- Enlightenment</li> <li>- Having an impact on a generation through teaching</li> <li>- Devaluation of teaching</li> <li>- Best research staff does not teach</li> <li>- Thatcher and impact on sociology</li> <li>- Experienced change over decades</li> <li>- In favour of stronger political engagement</li> <li>- Against quantitative sociology</li> <li>- Experience with media, radio</li> </ul>
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23  VII	Celine, 40, senior lecturer, University of London College	<p>Sociologist, influenced by many things, interdisciplinary, has always been fascinated by sociology, liberating experience, teaching as a small political act, engagement as public intellectual (but not only big phrases, how one conducts oneself as an academic, Bourdieu, she feels enormously privileged, her work as a hobby despite RAE pressure, a lot of community work, but not with an extra label – it just happens, taking intellectual work outside of academia – galleries, public spaces, organic process, - personal, private, academic, political, visual work together, but she explicitly seeks outside places, encourages students to do so; finding inspiration elsewhere and bringing it back, never stops learning, intervening in spaces, the sociological and political are in everything she does; moved towards particular theorists because of her background, Marxism, feminism, ethnicity, bringing different theories together, she is not angry with the discipline because she gets a lot of inspiration elsewhere, no need to justify what is sociological about sthg. in her department but for RAE; teaching important; creatively, teaching the classics differently, looking beyond Europe, not to be scared of contradictions, sociologists write radical things about race and gender – but they do not act accordingly – disappointing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interdisciplinarity, art</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Public intellectuals</li> <li>- Privilege to be an academic</li> <li>- Departmental culture as inspiration</li> <li>- Audiences outside academia</li> <li>- Spaces</li> <li>- Interfering in spaces</li> <li>- Politics</li> <li>- Class, race, gender</li> <li>- Difference</li> <li>- Sociology as a powerful discipline</li> <li>- Corruptness of academia</li> </ul>
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24 VIII	Barbara, 46, senior lecturer, former polytechnic	Feels as a worker, working class, left school young; she is more pessimistic, maybe as a byproduct of getting older, had grander ideas when she was younger, open debate and critique as the task of sociology; enlightenment; studying as a mind opener, she is particularly mindful of students who have competing demands of work and study; Marx, Bourdieu, Adorno and Freud as influences; double standards of ethics; politics important but in a smaller context, against the hypocrisy of large political acts, against any kind of pretension, tension between sociology as a profession and sociology as a critical or analytical tradition of lived inquiry. Hardly ever in public, very ambivalent; wants to do more journalistic work; not with TV and internet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working class background</li> <li>- University as mind changing experience</li> <li>- Enlightenment</li> <li>- Changing ambitions within the years</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Psychoanalysis</li> <li>- Marx</li> <li>- Ethics and double standards</li> <li>- Promoting public sociology vs. not doing anything</li> </ul>
25 VIII	Neil, lecturer, 43, former polytechnic	Working class, left school at the age of 16, working, mature student, sociology as the discipline that connects everything, duty to be critical, he is a social theorist, negative thinking, encouraging students to think otherwise, getting students to think across disciplinary boundaries, his sociology informs his politics and vice versa, ethical and political responsibility to making the world better, objectivity is not value neutrality, students as an audience, engaging sociologically in social movements, he is not engaged with media outside academia (not for him), tough days for critical researchers will come, especially for social theorists, pressures of HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working class background</li> <li>- Mature student</li> <li>- Social theory</li> <li>- Marxism</li> <li>- Politically active</li> <li>- Enlightenment</li> <li>- Teaching (critical traditions)</li> <li>- Politics, change</li> <li>- Pressures of HE</li> <li>- Public (no radio, TV, media)</li> </ul>

26 VIII	Oliver, senior lecturer, 53, former polytechnic	Found interest in the discipline, was a civil servant before, Teaching; working class, changing take on sociology, idealism of people who were educated in the 1970s, Thatcherism, sociology more like a job for him, also relates that to Thatcher years, Marxist background, politics difficult question, students as publics, consultancy, occasional TV contributions; RAE problematic; would always recommend people to study sociology, double standards of ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working class background</li> <li>- Mature student</li> <li>- Students' movement in 70s</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Thatcher era</li> <li>- Ethics</li> </ul>
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27 IX	Victoria, 48, professor, former polytechnic	<p>Sociologist, but doesn't hold the profession in high esteem, often a context of oppression; never saw herself as an academic; centrality of education in her upbringing; always interested in inequality, education, race, ethnicity; Thatcher – sociology of education under threat – came to a Sociology Department; sociology did not protest enough against Thatcher; British sociology has always lacked a radical edge; critical reflection concerns all academics; important within the workplace, with students; political obligation – creating the means for; sees herself as an activist masquerading as an intellectual; having the privilege to draw on certain bodies of knowledge; activism in an intellectual sense; desire to reduce social inequalities; reflexivity needed; research is also about her lived experience; she can't switch off the topic; hierarchy within sociology; Marx, Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, Fanon as influences; finds some of the postmodernists unhelpful – they forgot about the social; teaching; providing students with marginalised social theory that is not part of textbooks; universities still very white spaces – dispiriting; sociologists mainly write for other sociologists, she also disseminates her work in other formats and for other audiences; working with media – a compromise, but worth it; sociology should be part of formal schooling; sociology should not disguise its research subject – poverty instead of social exclusion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociologist</li> <li>- Disappointment with the discipline</li> <li>- Discipline as a reflection of inequalities in society (race, gender, class)</li> <li>- Gap between theory and practice</li> <li>- Thatcher</li> <li>- British sociology</li> <li>- Desire to reduce social inequalities</li> <li>- Critical reflection as a responsibility for all academics</li> <li>- Conduct in the workplace</li> <li>- Political responsibility as a human being, academic, sociologist</li> <li>- Reflexivity</li> <li>- Research more than just an intellectual pursuit</li> <li>- Postmodern theory unhelpful</li> <li>- Providing students with alternative narratives in social theory</li> <li>- Constraints in publishing and funding for alternative views</li> <li>- Going public</li> <li>- Working with media as a worthwhile payoff between distortion and communicating widely</li> <li>- Sociology should be part of formal schooling</li> </ul>
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28 IX	Brian, 43, reader, former polytechnic	<p>Sociology as a home, but not precious about disciplinary boundaries; a lot of sociology based on the experiences of the majority of people; challenging the validity of majority knowledge, we generalise too much, looking beyond Britain, being aware of situatedness of knowledge, we don't practise sociological knowledge in our surroundings; sociology should not fill all spaces of life; being human; he is not a 'political animal'; concerned about the hegemonic status of Foucault in queer theory; a lot of political correctness in sociology; not drawn to a particular theory, depends on the research question, theory important but we need to get our hands dirty; against stories of victimisation in his research; sociologists in the UK don't take pride in their profession; sociologists need to be more vocal, they are not taken seriously; journalists work towards a different agenda; generally he doesn't agree to be interviewed, bad experience with journalists, complete distortion of his research, they want to confirm stereotypes; good experience with Laurie Taylor; he is aware of his own contradictions; work with user groups; important to be critical of our own ideological frameworks as we are of others; most sociologists only watch Channel 4 and read the Guardian; likes teaching a lot, to see students grow; devalued; would have proceeded much faster career wise but wanted to carry on teaching undergraduates; glamour of research is out of proportion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociology a reflection of the experiences of the majority</li> <li>- Ethnicity, religion, sexuality</li> <li>- Emphasising difference</li> <li>- Against hegemonic status of certain theories in sociology</li> <li>- Looking beyond sociology</li> <li>- Theoretical background depends on research question</li> <li>- Being human</li> <li>- Gap between sociological theory and sociological practice</li> <li>- Sociologists not critical of themselves</li> <li>- Public sociology</li> <li>- Teaching</li> <li>- Glamour of research out of proportion</li> </ul>
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29 X	Richard, 52, principal lecturer, new university	Sociologist, will always be one; there is no difference between work and life; part of the cohorts of the 1970s; still has the same ideals as twenty years ago, helping others; theoretical home base – left criminology, Stuart Hall, Zygmunt Bauman, Foucault; criminology; an intellectual perspective always is a political one; teaching important for him; teaching less privileged student populations particularly rewarding; taken up by administration at the moment; cannot do a lot of research at the moment; department, a lot of discussion in his department on sociology recently; Criminology is completely taking over everything - he doesn't like this fragmentation; we should not outsource sociology to other schools; involvement with the public; community project with police; he doesn't like being on TV or the radio, they always reduce complexity; he would like sociology to be more public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sociological identity</li> <li>- 1970s cohort of intellectual socialisation</li> <li>- Helping others</li> <li>- Teaching less privileged students intellectual is political perspective</li> <li>- Institutional constraints</li> <li>- Administration</li> <li>- Sociology needs to be more public</li> <li>- Reluctance to be on TV and radio media distort research</li> </ul>
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30 X	Nancy, 45, senior lecturer, new university	<p>Strong belief in the subject; sociological identity reinforced by doing PhD in a business school; politicised by cultural background in home country; migrant; sociology must shake us up; loves teaching – making people enthusiastic, going outside the classroom with students; what we do best is to work with students; no separation between intellectual and political project – the political operates on all levels (but not interested in politics in the UK); professional associations have to take political stance; sociology more than a job – you can't switch it off; she is not an ivory tower academic; gender – feminism; sociology bad reputation as discipline; she has no relationship to outside world so far; doesn't want to write for popular media/radio/TV – no control over outcome – doesn't want to add to superficial outputs; changes in HE, managerialism; department – gender discrimination, reflection of inequalities of the outside world – sociologists are in no way better; every young person should be forced to do some sociology; wishes for sociology to be more respected</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sociological identity</li> <li>- Reinforced by business school contact</li> <li>- Political socialisation in home country</li> <li>- Teaching very important</li> <li>- Link between intellectual and political project</li> <li>- Sociology more than a job</li> <li>- Managerialism in HE</li> <li>- Sociology and departments reflect inequalities in outside world</li> <li>- No links to public(s) as a sociologist</li> <li>- No wish to engage with media</li> <li>- Sociology as a basis education for every young person</li> <li>- Sociology should be more respected</li> </ul>
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## **APPENDIX E: The British Higher Education System**

This appendix provides a synopsis of changes in the post-second world war period of British Higher Education. An outline of the major structural changes within UK Higher Education as well as the expansion of sociology in British universities in the light of the above shall particularly provide a non-UK readership with a better understanding of the British Higher Education system.

### **UK Higher Education since the 1960s**

Until the 1960s the UK systems of Higher Education were characterised by a small number of institutions, elitism, stability and state-funding. The major universities in England since the Middle Ages had been Oxford and Cambridge. Prior to the 1960s, Halsey locates the two key periods of British university expansion in the late Victorian period with the foundation of the civic universities (such as Leeds or Manchester) and after the First World War, with red-brick universities such as Birmingham, Bristol and Sheffield becoming independent universities (Halsey, 1992).

The social and economic developments in the first two decades after the Second World War increased the pressures towards the growth of the university sector. The growing middle classes showed increasing aspirations for Higher Education. Between 1958 and 1961 the creation of seven new universities in England was authorised – East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick and York. All of these universities are big campus universities and are located at the periphery of cities as land was cheaper outside (Rich, 2001). Following the Robbins Report from 1963 which provided a thorough analysis of British Higher Education and

recommended an expansion of the British university system, funding for universities increased. According to Halsey, the number of full-time students rose from 119,000 in 1962 to 964,000 in 1988/99, including part-time students (Halsey, 1992: 91). The number of universities almost doubled in the 1960s, from 25 to 45 between 1960 and 1969. Furthermore, in 1970, 30 former technical colleges were given the status of polytechnics (Deem and Hillyard and Reed, 2007: 38). At that time the production of academic knowledge was largely unregulated through central institutions, leaving decision-making processes to universities and departments themselves.

### **Thatcherism and Higher Education**

However, the expansionist and laissez-faire phase of higher education of the 1960s and 1970s came to an end with the election of the Conservative Thatcher government in 1979 and the economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the Thatcher era public expenditure and public services experienced severe cuts. Shattock notes that universities were amongst the first institutions to suffer from budget restrictions. Early on in the Thatcher government the Secretary of State for Education and Science was told that the universities budget needed a £100 m cut (Shattock, 2008: 187). These developments went hand in hand with demands for accountability and increased efficiency for university resources (Lucas, 2006). In the following decades, UK Higher Education has been subject to numerous processes of modernisation by government and university funding bodies. Since the 1980s, marketisation and privatisation of publicly funded education, the implementation of performance indicators for research and teaching and restrictions on units of funding per student and capital expenditure have brought about a cultural change in British

Higher Education (Deem and Hillyard and Reed, 2007: 39). Commentators say that whilst this process of new governance, managerialism and accountability started in the Thatcher era, it did find its continuation with New Labour since 1997 (Jenkins, 2006; Shattock, 2008).

The most important changes in the 1990s concerned the institutional unification of universities and former polytechnics. In 1992, The Further and Higher Education Act gave university status to the former polytechnics and thereby abolished the binary line between universities and polytechnics. Following the Act of 1992, all Higher Education institutions had to agree to submit their work to auditing for research and teaching (Fillipakou and Tapper, 2008).

### **New Labour**

The results of a national review of Higher Education in 1997 were summarised in the Dearing Report which led to the introduction of tuition fees for British undergraduate students and also recommended to put more emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning and to enhance university management structures (Deem and Hillyard and Reed, 2007). In 1997, with the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which aims to evaluate teaching quality, new pressures for academics arose (Morley, 2003).

Since New Labour came into power in 1997, widening participation in Higher Education became one of the key targets of the Blair government. The official ambition as it was expressed in the White Paper of 2003 was that 50 per cent of the

18-20-year olds would go to university by the year 2010 (Neave, 2006). However, at the same time the number of student loans were cut (Shattock, 2008).

### **Quality Assurance in British Higher Education**

There are a number of audits that regulate the quality of teaching and research in British Higher Education. The most important ones are the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Teaching Quality Audit (TQA).

The purpose of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is to assess the quality of university research based on the judgement of academic peers. The rating of departments determines the amount of funding allocated by the state to universities and departments (Lucas, 2006). The implementation of the RAE was one of the consequences of the Jarratt Report in 1985 that argued for a system of monitoring of the activities and performance of universities. To date, there have been six RAEs in the UK in 1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008. Over the years, the procedure of the RAE changed considerably, in particular after the first RAE when a common evaluative scale was established as well as subject panels and criteria put into place according to which publications were to be submitted for the RAE (Tapper, 2003).

The implementation of quality assurance such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has substantially altered working conditions for academics and has been subject to rigid criticism by academics and trade unions (Sparkes, 2007; Willmott, 2003). According to critics, as the emphasis is on research and publications that can be submitted to the prestigious RAE, teaching does not receive the recognition it deserves. Besides academics have been experiencing a rising teaching workload as a

result of the massification of academia from the 1960s onwards (Martin, 1999; Miller, 1996).

Considerable changes in the procedure of the RAE are to be expected after the RAE 2008. According to recent reports, the research assessment exercise will be replaced by the so called research framework (REF). Research funding will then be based on numerical indicators of quality, such as citations, instead of peer review.<sup>99</sup> This move towards the employment of numerical indicators has been widely criticised.<sup>100</sup>

The evaluation of teaching and learning in British Higher Education institutions is a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is responsible for assessing the quality of teaching in UK Higher Education institutions. In order to respond to the requirements of the QAA, universities all across the country have put effort into improving the status and rewards for teaching. Most universities now have teaching and learning strategies and implemented new funding schemes and better professional training in order to increase the quality of teaching. Regardless of this, the results of the TQA do not have as much effect on the Higher Education landscape as the research assessment exercise (RAE). Rather, the RAE has served to increase the hierarchy between research and teaching and creates the risk of further increasing the divide between research and teaching universities (Lucas, 2006) Whereas research and publications often are requirements for promotion, this is far less so the case with teaching, in particular in research-intensive universities (Parker, 2008).

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99 Times Higher Education Supplement, 'Despite losing their punch, some players still won big prizes'. 19th March 2009.

100 Times Higher Education Supplement, 'Keep peer input in REF'. 8th January 2009.

### **The expansion of British sociology after the Second World War**

Sociology only started to exist as an academic subject at the LSE in 1907 and only began to have a broader academic audience from the 1950s onwards. As Halsey put it, ‘the history of British sociology before the Second World War is in effect an aspect of the history of LSE’ (Halsey, 2004: 14). By the mid-1950s, Leicester and LSE were still the only universities with sociology departments although Platt also mentions Birmingham, Liverpool and Bedford as institutions which made important contributions to sociology at the time (Platt, 2003). The belated recognition of sociology as a subject in its own right by Britain’s leading universities – Oxford and Cambridge – is indicative of the status of sociology in this country until the 1950s. Sociology was only introduced into the Cambridge curriculum in 1961 and into the Oxford Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree (PPE) in 1962 (Halsey, 2004). In line with the economic boom and the expansion of the British Higher Education system in the 1960s and 1970s, sociology equally grew (Platt, 2005: 26). Whilst there were not more than 200 undergraduates studying sociology in the 1940s – most of whom studied at the LSE – this number had increased to nearly 3,000 students by 1966/7 and to 4,000 students by 1970/1 (Halsey, 2004: 89). This unprecedented growth of sociology students also required more sociologists at the level of teaching and research. Yet, as there was a shortage of sociologists with PhDs, people were recruited for departmental positions that Platt describes as underqualified from today’s perspective (Platt, 2005).

During the Thatcher era the period of great expansion for sociology came to a rapid close. Early retirement was encouraged and fewer appointments were made. As significant recruitment of academics only started again in the 1990s, Platt diagnoses

that the birth cohort of the early 1960s faced difficulties entering the academic labour market. (Platt, 2005). Besides, some sociology departments were closed and there were fewer grants available. Halsey mentions that the consequences of the Thatcher years were particularly harmful for sociology. The discipline was condemned as pretentious and subversive and as the bearer of left-wing ideology (Halsey, 2004). Halsey further notes that it was paradoxically during the next Conservative administration in the 1990s and due to its endeavours in expanding the Higher Education sector, when the number of sociology students more than doubled again (Halsey, 2004). By 2000 there were 24,090 sociology students across the UK. Besides, in 2000 sociology was taught in 114 out of 165 Higher Education institutions in the UK (Halsey, 2004: 235).